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MISSION OF Death

An Exciting Mystery Novelet

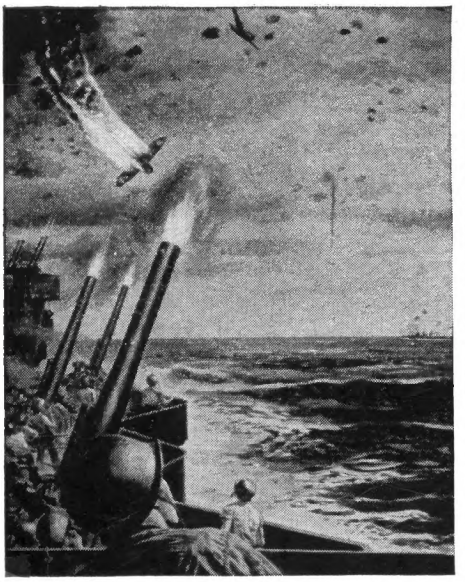
By M. D. ORR

MURDER THROUGH MAGIC

A Baffling Novelet

By CURTISS T. GARDNER

A THRILLING PUBLICATION



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POPULAR DETECTIVE

Vol. XXX, No. 2 — EVERY STORY BRAND NEW — February, 1946

Featured Mystery Novelet

MISSION OF DEATH

By M. D. ORR

British Agent Archie McCann, spy-hunter and anthropologist, tackles a baffling puzzle of murder and treachery when he is put ashore on Mindanao to carry out a perilous assignment! 13

Two Other Complete Novelets

WAR AT WILLOWMORE ..... Charles S. Strong 46

Death strikes mysteriously at the army tank crews of a great training base—and Jan Pieter Van Bronck, Boer detective, strikes back!

MURDER THROUGH MAGIC ..... Curtiss T. Gardner 56

Out of a bonfire, detective-magician Charles Mallory plucks a vital clue—then battles to balk a plausible trickster!

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The cemetery dirt on Joe Richards' shoes had a grim meaning

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Intrigue and murder stalk the old Grayson place

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Satchelfoot Kelly pins a rose on Willie Klump's lapel

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Where readers and the editor meet

POPULAR DETECTIVE, published every other month by Better Publications, Inc., at 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. N. L. Pines, President. Subscription (12 issues), $1.20; single copies, $.10. Foreign and Canadian postage extra. Reentered as second-class matter April 14, 1938, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879.
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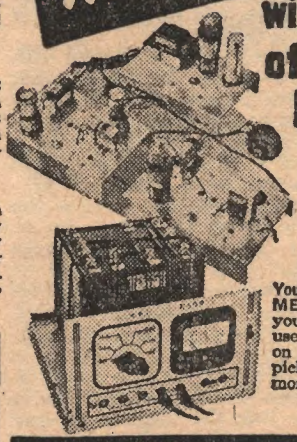

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OFFICIAL BUSINESS

A DEPARTMENT WHERE READERS AND THE EDITOR MEET

EVERYONE is familiar with the phrase, "And a little child shall lead them." It comes from the Bible and its meaning is well known. It has quite a different twist, however, in Robert S. Fenton's exciting novelet, DEATH HAS A POKER FACE, which tops the list of thrilling fiction fare in our next issue. In this smashing yarn it's to the electric chair that this "little child" leads them, for it's a little golden curl from her head that points out the murderer!

Old Judge Asa Calvin had always wanted to get in on the ground floor of a good murder. In the work that he had done for the last thirty years, all the pleasurable thrill and heart-quickening adventure was over by the time any part of a crime came up before his bench for judgment. Often Judge Calvin had hinted that he would like to get in on a "kill."

Amazing Evidence!

He did his hinting in the proper place all right. It was with the boys down at Homicide that the judge was particularly chummy, and often of an evening he'd drop around for a game of cards with them.

Detective Bill Dacey was a special pal. Dacey only wished—when he found that corpse on the hotel room floor—that old Judge Calvin hadn't gotten so impatient for a murder to happen. For all signs—including a certain silver-headed cane—pointed right smack-dab at the judge as the killer!

Bill Dacey didn't go right out and put the nippers on the kindly white-haired jurist. Dacey thought he'd rather turn in his badge than haul the judge in to face a charge of murder. For besides the murder evidence that pointed a bloody finger at Judge Calvin, Bill Dacey saw plenty other evidence that indicated a pat on the judge's back might be in order—for the judge's having rid the community of a particularly vicious and despicable thug who wanted to ruin the life and destroy the happiness of a beautiful girl in order to satisfy personal greed.

The beautiful girl was the judge's daughter. In a few days she was to marry a fine young fellow from a good and honorable family. But Detective Bill Dacey knew she'd probably rather have been dead—if the judge had not acted to save her reputation from the vile besmirching that murdered thug was about to loose upon her.

Still . . . no police officer could let anyone get away with murder, no matter how right the cause, or how pure the motive. Even kindly old Judge Calvin could be no exception.

It was a problem.

How Detective Bill Dacey solves that problem—and happily—makes DEATH HAS A POKER FACE, by Robert S. Fenton, a tense, fast-action novelet that you'll not soon forget. For breathless thrills, unusual surprises, and hard-boiled, realistic drama—this yarn can't be beat!

A Baffling Murder Puzzle

And, speaking of fast-action and breathless thrills, how's this? It's taken from the baffling crime novelet MURDER MAKES A CLAIM, by Lee E. Wells, also in the next issue. Tom Coville, special claims investigator for an insurance outfit, has just met up with the killer in the story—Brown . . .

> Brown started edging out of the automobile's seat, the gun level. Coville raised his cigarette and took another long drag. Suddenly, his hand dropped. The burning cigarette preseed hard against the pudgy hand that held the gun. Brown jerked at the pain and Coville, dropping the cigarette, grabbed Brown's wrist, twisting it upward.
>
> The gun exploded. Glass shattered as the slug tore through the windshield. Coville threw himself forward, his fist pounding at the fat face. Brown was caught in an awkward position. The steering wheel hampered him, but he fought back with a quiet, desperate fury. The gun roared again and Coville felt a slash of fire along his side.
>
> He twisted hard on the man's wrist, pulling the gun up and back. For a long, eternal moment they sat quiet and straining. The sweat popped out on Brown's face and Coville felt the muscles of his wrist and arm tremble against the mighty pressure the big man brought against it.
>
> Death was only the twist of a wrist away. . . .

That's the pace at which MURDER MAKES A CLAIM breezes along. And, incidentally, in the story the killer's name isn't Brown. We've used "Brown" instead of his actual name, so as not to reveal the answer to one of the most baffling murder puzzles we've ever run across. Find out who "Brown" really is by reading—MURDER MAKES A CLAIM!

Fast and Furious!

Also in the next issue is a third novelet, THE LUCK CALCULATOR, by Paul Regard.

(Continued on Page 8)

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*Sources: "American Vaudeville: Its Life and Times," by Douglas Gilbert (published by Whittlesey House); I. C. S. records.

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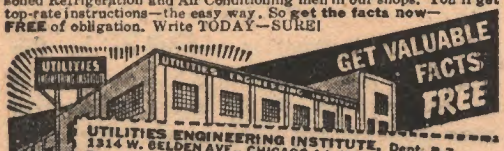

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OFFICIAL BUSINESS

(Continued from Page 6)

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Be on hand for the next issue! It's a treat in fast action, chills, and thrills!

Letters From Our Readers

WE HAVE many interesting letters in our mailbag this month, and so without further chatter we'll spread a few of them out for everybody to see. Our opener comes from up north.

In the August issue of POPULAR DETECTIVE the only story I didn't like was HOOK, LINE AND SINKER, by M. D. Orr. Why? Because in it were sentences like, "What name fella stop long house belong masta?" and "Tegek savey paper." I can't understand that kind of talk. Maybe it's because I'm too young. But I still like to read your book. So does my mother.—*Wesley T., Downsview, Ontario, Canada.*

Thanks for your letter, Wesley. If you had ever been in the South Pacific or Oriental countries, as many of our servicemen have, you'd know that the strange talk you mention is actually the way the natives there speak English.

It's known as pidgin English, and really isn't so difficult once you get the hang of it. We're sorry it spoiled your enjoyment of this story, though, for many of our readers have written us that they found the yarn excellent.

And here's a note from a reader who particularly likes the stories of—well, of many of our writers.

I have been reading POPULAR DETECTIVE for a long time. When I read a story I do not tear it apart to find out if it could be true. A good story, true or not, is a pleasant pastime.

I like all the stories in POPULAR DETECTIVE, especially those by Norman A. Daniels and Charles S. Strong, yes, and Curtiss T. Gardner. The others are O.K. also.

I would like more about the Dutch character, by Charles S. Strong. They're dandies.—*Pearl L. Moon, E. Ft. Myers, Florida.*

You bet they are dandies, Pearl. And you'll see many more stories by the authors you

(Concluded on Page 10)

The February issue of the new pocket-size MYSTERY BOOK Magazine features the newest mystery novel by Mignon G. Eberhart, also H. H. Holmes, Will Cuppy and others. Get it today, 25c at all newsstands. *(Advt.)*

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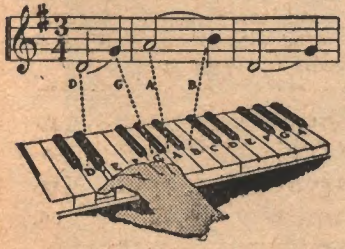

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OFFICIAL BUSINESS

(Concluded from Page 8)

mention in forthcoming issues. And a western reader writes:

The October issue of POPULAR DETECTIVE was the second or third I've read. I greatly enjoyed MURDER VALLEY, by Thomson Burtis, so how about publishing more stories by Mr. Burtis.

I sure liked the one about Willie Klump. I only hope he doesn't wind up in a booby-hatch one of these days or get dumped in the clink by Satchelfoot.

DEATH AT OODNADATTA, by Charles S. Strong, was pretty good, but not quite enough action. NICE NIGHT FOR MURDER, by Jack Gleoman, was *too* short. MURDER IN THE FOG, by M. D. Orr, was fair.

Be sure and print more stories about Blaze Wynn by Thomson Burtis.—*Mrs. R. C. Thompson, Grand Lake, Colorado.*

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A clue leads to the finger prints and the finger prints to the slayer

...now...here are the FINGER PRINTS

1 2 3 4

Who was guilty?

1. Lady Friend 2. The Waiter
3. The Florist 4. Bowler #1
5. Bowler #2 6. Bowler #3
7. The Slayer

5 6 7

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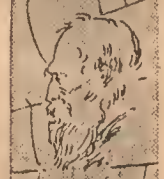

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A young man was standing on the edge of the ledge, pointing a big automatic at McCann

MISSION OF DEATH

By M. D. ORR

British Agent Archie McCann, spy-hunter and anthropologist, tackles a baffling puzzle of murder and treachery when he is put ashore on Mindanao to carry out a perilous assignment!

CHAPTER I

War Victim

IN SHOCKED silence, Archibald Sylvester Brewster McCann, British secret agent and erstwhile anthropologist, stood in the bare ward on the small island of Morotai, and looked down at the bandaged man lying upon the narrow cot. Swathed in linen and cotton like a mummy from head to foot, the patient was a pathetic object.

Standing beside McCann was Major Brown, middle-aged, burly, clean-shaven, natty in his Army uniform, staring also, and making soft noises that indicated horror and sympathy. The noises didn't disturb the patient. He couldn't hear them. He was unconscious, dead to the world.

AN EXCITING COMPLETE MYSTERY NOVELET

At the foot of the cot lounged the ward surgeon, looking bored. He was a bald-headed, rotund, elderly man with nose-glasses. A stubbly mustache protruded from his upper lip like a red brush. Apparently long war experience had inured him to terrible sights.

"The Japs did a good job on him all right," the ward surgeon remarked. "They punctured his ear drums, burned out his eyes, gouged out his tongue and—other things. We've been keeping him alive by means of plasma and injections, but we expect him to pop off any time. So you'll have to move fast if you're planning to get any information out of him." He put up a stubby finger, rubbed his chin and cocked a quizzical eye in McCann's direction. "How are you going to communicate? Telegraph?"

But McCann did not smile. He was horrified. There was too much at stake for McCann to feel humorous.

He had arrived at this air field in Morotai only a brief thirty minutes before, straight from Port Moresby, where the British Intelligence Service of the Allied Military Government had its Administrative Unit.

It was Jason French, Port Moresby Chief of Police, who had called in McCann, a few hours previously, and put him on the case.

"We've just learned the Japs have killed those three native scouts we sent down to Mindanao," Jason angrily informed McCann when he entered Jason's office. "Those scouts were three of the best men we had. And now, last night, they got our fourth man. Early this morning he was discovered badly mutilated, lying on the air field up at Morotai. We'd like to get what information he has before he dies. Will you hustle up to Morotai and handle it, Archie? You'll have to start at once."

McCann gazed at his best friend, Jason French, without favor.

"Oh, you're picking on me, eh?" he growled. "It's another disagreeable job—something to turn the stomach—so let Archie go! Why don't you move your lazy stumps and handle it yourself?"

Jason French jumped up from the swivel chair and shook his fist in McCann's general direction.

"Blast it!" he roared. "You know I'm busy. You know I'm all tied up. What do you mean by insinuating that I'm—"

MCCANN laughed and held up a placating hand.

"There, there, calm down. I said I'd go, didn't I? What are you bellowing about, you screeching baboon?"

So, about an hour afterward, McCann had taken off in a special plane which had landed him on the airfield on northern Mortai. There Major Brown had met him in an Army sedan and driven him directly to this hospital.

With difficulty McCann tore his fascinated gaze away from the injured man on the cot and gazed at the red-mustached surgeon.

"Can he write?" McCann asked. "That is, when he's conscious."

The surgeon shook his head.

"No. We tried that. We put a pencil in his hands but he just dropped it. Either he couldn't write or he didn't understand what it was for."

"Can you bring him out of his coma?" McCann asked.

"Sure, if it's necessary," the doctor said. "But he's going to suffer a lot when we do."

McCann frowned and glanced at Major Brown. "If he could hear or see or talk, the problem would be simple enough. But this way, injured like he is, the obstacles are almost insurmountable. We've got to find out what happened to him. We've got to."

Major Brown stuck his hands in his pockets, then reached into the inside pocket of his tunic, pulled out a cigar, remembered suddenly that he was in a hospital, and stuck the cigar out of sight again.

"Yeah, it's a tough one," he admitted grouchily. "From what you told me, I gather this fellow was down in Mindanao, trying to get into touch with a couple of guerilla chiefs. That right?"

"Sure." McCann nodded. "One of 'em named Rizal. He's a Filipino. And the other one's a Malay by the name of Sapin. Sapin, by the way, is the only man on Mindanao who can make the head-hunting Moros behave."

"'Civilize 'em with a Krag,'" Brown quoted softly. "Why? Do they have to behave? There's nothing but Japs down there now?"

"We need their help," McCann explained impatiently. "It's a military necessity, in case the American Army should ever decide to invade the Philippines." McCann did not explain that the contemplated invasion by General MacArthur was only two weeks off, that every moment counted, and that if arrangements with the guerrillas were not completed at once, dire consequences might result.

Even a delay of one week might prove

McCann raised his guns and covered the astonished Japanese soldiers

disastrous. McCann frowned and spoke to the surgeon.

"How long will he live, Doctor?"

The surgeon had lost his facetiousness. He had begun to get some inkling of the tremendous issues involved and the importance of the man on the cot.

"Not long, I'm afraid," he answered gravely. "You'll have to hurry."

At this moment, just when it was needed, McCann had one of those inspirations which had won him fame in the British Army Intelligence Service.

"There's a native village somewhere around near here, isn't there?" he said, turning to Major Brown. "Seems as if I remember seeing one half buried in the jungle, just before the plane landed."

Brown grinned and nodded.

"Correct. You have good eyes. What about the native village?"

"I want to talk with the head man right away," McCann said. "And make it snappy, will you, please?"

It was the ward surgeon who broke in then.

"The head man works over at the Administration offices," the doctor said. "He does odd jobs around the place. I'll have him brought over at once."

He headed for the wall telephone, out in the corridor.

When he returned, McCann made another request.

"Can you dig me up a drum, too. Any kind. The type the Army uses would be just fine."

The ward surgeon looked astonished but controlled his curiosity. "Sure. We have plenty of drums. I can get you a dozen, if you want."

"Just one," McCann said with a smile. "One drum will be sufficient."

In a few minutes the native head man and the drum arrived. McCann addressed the head man.

"Do you understand English?"

"Me talk a little bit pidgin," the head man answered.

McCann nodded to the surgeon and waved at the patient on the cot. "Wake him up."

A nurse brought in a hypodermic and made an injection. Soon the man on the cot stirred, moaned and made motions indicating pain. McCann placed the drum on the chest of the patient, and again spoke to the head man.

"Mebbe you talk talk drum?"

"Yes, massa," the headman answered.

"All right," McCann said. "Make drum talk. Find out man belong sick savey drum talk."

THE head man got the idea. Leaning over, he began a rhythmic beating of the drum with the tips of his fingers. The restless movement of the wounded scout on the cot stopped. The head man sensed his reaction.

Then the scout's hand began searching for the drum. McCann reached down and placed the scout's hand against the side of the drum. The scout made a feeble attempt to strike the drum but due to his weakened condition was unable to summon enough strength.

"Give him a stimulant," McCann ordered as he picked up a small instrument and put it in the hand of the scout. Dr. Brown quickly administered a stimulant. The head man kept on with his drum talk.

As the strengthening potion began to work, the scout's fingers tightened on the metal instrument which McCann had placed in his hand. The headman's fingers beat an insistent tattoo on the drum. Finally the scout struck the side of the drum in a slow and measured beat.

The head man beamed at McCann. "Him hear talk talk."

"Ask him talk talk everything that happened," McCann ordered. "Find out everything plenty to quick."

For fifteen minutes the men conversed by drum talk. Everyone in the room waited in tense silence as the head man obtained the information that a few minutes before had seemed a remote possibility. Finally the head man stopped and turned to McCann.

"Me savey all now," he announced.

"Okay. What did he say?"

"Him say him stop long beach belong Butuan. Him make hole in sand, hide talk box in sand. Him go find place belong Rizal. Find Rizal. Him and Rizal start place belong talk box. Japanese catch him and Rizal. Japanese take him away one place and take Rizal away place belong two place. No savey place Japanese take Rizal. No see Rizal. Japanese try make him talk. Him no talk. Japanese burn out eyes. Japanese burn feet. Him no talk. Japanese whip. Him no talk. By-n-by, Japanese get plenty much man, cut out tongue and fixem up ear no hear no more He no savey no more."

"Ask him if he see where place is and how many man belong place belong Japs?" McCann requested.

After several more minutes of drum talk, the headman turned to McCann.

"Him say Japanese stop long place belong name Butuan. Plenty too much men belong Japanese. Him say one bad man belong Filipinie stop long Rizal sometime talk talk all time long Japanese plenty too much."

"So that's the solution," McCann snapped. "A fifth columnist in Rizal's own organization." He turned to the headman. "Ask him he savey name belong man belong no good."

"I'm afraid it's too late," the surgeon said. "He is dead."

The faithful and plucky scout's hand that had tapped out his message now was relaxed and limp. The instrument had fallen from his grasp and his motionless body seemed satisfied and content.

"Well, that's that." McCann looked at the dead man on the cot. "He was a great fellow!"

"How did you come to think of drum talk?" Major Brown asked.

"I found myself unconsciously tapping the chart board," McCann explained. "I realized that vibration might take the place of actual hearing. I knew the scout was a native of New Guinea, and that he was able to read drum talk. It was a shot in the dark and it worked."

At this moment an orderly entered the ward and spoke to the surgeon, who walked over to McCann's side.

"There is a submarine waiting for you outside in the lagoon, Mr. McCann," the doctor said. "Believe it or not, that's what I'm told."

McCann turned quickly toward the doctor. "A submarine?" Then he chuckled, greatly amused. "That's Jason French's doing, I'll bet a hat! The buzzard!"

Major Brown laughed but the doctor looked startled.

"I beg your pardon?" he said.

"Just talking to myself." McCann laughed again. "You see, when two men have worked together as long as French and I, we get to anticipate each other's wants."

"Yes?"

"I might have known! Okay. Lead me to the iron fish."

Secretly McCann was pleased. He had high respect for Jason French and usually his faith was justified.

AFTER making a survey of the equipment already aboard the submarine, McCann took some additional supplies along with him and the pig-boat chugged away from the shore. When they were well on their way, Commander Deerfield handed McCann a sealed envelope.

"What's this?" McCann asked. "More secret orders?"

"Very secret, Mr. McCann," the commander answered quietly. "These orders must not be seen by any person except yourself. You are to memorize them thoroughly and then burn the papers. All I know is that I'm to take you to a place about five miles north of the mouth of the Agusan River in northeastern Mindanao and put you ashore after midnight."

McCann grunted. "Seems that I don't have much to say about things any more."

"You will be the fifth man I've landed on Mindanao," the commander announced soberly. "Here's hoping you're alive when I come to take you off. Watch your step and don't ever give a Jap a break."

On the evening of the fifth day the submarine arrived in the Bay of Butuan, Mindanao. The dark and forbidding coast line loomed dimly off the port side of the submarine as it rolled in a choppy sea. The town of Butuan was situated several miles up the Agusan River from the point where it emptied into the bay. Black clouds made a lightless canopy overhead.

"We'll wait until after midnight to land you," the commander told McCann. "Trust you will have better luck than the other poor devils."

McCann grinned. "What a cheerful sort of chap you are."

The commander smiled back at him. They were good friends by now and the commander likewise was on a perilous service. He was risking his life every day in this war.

"It's my merry sunshine nature," he said to McCann. "I was born with it. I can even see comical quirks in cemeteries."

About ten o'clock the clouds began to break away. By midnight the stars were sparkling brilliantly in a cloudless sky. The submarine edged toward the shore until McCann, outside on the deck, could hear the breakers as they crashed on the beach.

He looked at the small boat the men had inflated and loaded with the equipment he would need on Mindanao. He wondered whether it would survive the pounding of the surf, or whether he and his valuable cargo would be dumped into the sea. He did not worry about himself, because he was

an expert swimmer, but he did worry about losing the equipment that might mean the success of his mission.

The submarine came to a stop.

"This is it, Archie." Commander Deerfield wrung McCann's hand. "I wish I had a rabbit's foot to lend you, I really do. We probably won't see each other until the big scrap's over. Until then, so long."

"So long, Jeff," McCann said. Then he stepped into the rubber boat.

CHAPTER II

Jungle Irregulars

CAUTIOUSLY McCann paddled the little rubber boat in which he was seated, toward unseen beach and the jungle which edged it. Darkness formed an opaque curtain around him, but ahead he could hear the distant mutter of breakers which served as his guide.

Several times waves broke over the side of his boat, but otherwise the trip was uneventful until he reached the surf.

Here he received a vigorous shaking up and the boat shipped enough water to give him a thorough wetting. However, he managed to reach the shore on the crest of a huge wave. It lifted the boat high into the air and set it down with a terrific jolt on the white sand of the beach. Jumping out, McCann dragged the contrivance beyond the reach of the thundering combers.

He glanced seaward. Darkness hid the submarine. Probably it had departed, by now. Turning toward the black, night-veiled jungle, he searched for possible enemies. He found the tangled undergrowth came within a short distance of the water's edge.

He drew his flashlight from his pocket and beamed it quickly toward the jungle. A black wall of matted vines and vegetation confronted him. Switching off his flashlight he waited several seconds for his eyes to become accustomed to the night. Then he got a small shovel from the boat and quickly dug a large hole in the soft sand far above the water level, throwing the sand out into the water where the waves would smooth it into the floor of the sea.

Wrapping all of the equipment he had brought ashore in the deflated boat, he placed it in the hole and covered it up with sand. He leveled the sand, packing it to a firmness corresponding to the rest of the beach. Using his flashlight he hid his shovel in the edge of the matted undergrowth and returned to the water's edge.

McCann realized that he must wait until he could find the land marks described in his secret orders. However, when he noticed a large ridge of rock protruding from the jungle out over the beach, he walked nearer. He discovered a cavelike opening on the seaward-side. It made an excellent place for him to hide in case anyone should approach from the jungle.

Getting down to his hands and knees, he crawled into the depression underneath the ledge and settled down to await the dawn. The rushing waves beat a soothing and restful rhythm in his ears. He began a careful review of his secret orders as he remembered them. They were short and to the point.

For three months the Allied Command had been trying to establish contact with the guerrilla Filipinos on Mindanao without success. Four other men had preceded him to Mindanao. Only one had been heard from. That was Maru, the native scout who had been dumped on the airfield at Morotai. McCann had been told that every time a leader appeared among the guerrillas, he disappeared. Even Rizal, of the Filipinos, and Sapin, the Malayan, were now rumored to be prisoners of the Japanese. Commander Deerfield had told McCann that, last night, aboard the submarine.

Near the beach where McCann had been instructed to land, there was a ridge of rock extending out into the sea. It was of peculiar shape and he was sure he couldn't miss it. Near this ledge the Spaniards had erected a monument, in 1872, to commemorate the landing of Magellan. But McCann could not find the monument. The Japs had probably destroyed it.

McCann's specific mission was to establish contact with the guerrillas. But after his talk with Commander Deerfield, he also realized there was something else of paramount importance. He must find out where the Japanese were obtaining their information regarding the guerrilla leaders. If Rizal and Sapin had been captured, how had it

been done? Were there traitors in the insurgent ranks? He must settle that question once and for all.

The more he thought it over, the more McCann was inclined to believe that secret Japanese agents were working from within the ranks of the guerrillas. This would account for much of what had happened. He remembered what Maru, the mutilated scout, had drummed out with his injured hands before dying.

Yes, it was a tough assignment. McCann realized that.

Mentally McCann reviewed the landmarks he had been told to locate upon landing. One of them was the monument which the Spaniards had erected in 1872, in honor of the landing of Magellan in 1521. It was a question whether the monument was still there. Perhaps the Japanese had destroyed it. They took a barbaric delight in tearing down historical things such as that. Or perhaps the sea had covered it up.

McCann had need to find the site of the Spanish monument. It would serve as a jumping-off point before he started his dangerous journey into the interior, where the guerrillas were operating.

From the ledge, McCann had been instructed to travel due east from this point until he came to a small river, which he would follow to a high waterfall. Several miles south of the waterfall there was a high bluff. He was to remain there until he was found by the guerrilla messenger who came daily to this place for the purpose of taking any Allied agents who might appear back to the camp of the irregulars further on in the interior.

McCann had been warned this place of meeting might be known to the Japanese, and that he must use all caution when approaching it. He had been told not to reveal himself unless he was absolutely sure that the person who came to the place was a Filipino and not a Japanese. The task before him was dangerous. He wondered if, perhaps, it might not be suicidally dangerous.

The dawn broke with tropical suddenness. McCann had been preoccupied with his thoughts and had not noticed the first streaks of light which preceded the break of day. He crawled cautiously from his cave, glancing up and down the beach. There was no one in sight, so he sighed with relief and faced the sea.

From above his head came a harsh command.

"Put 'em up, you!"

McCann whirled around. A young man of about twenty-four years of age was standing on the edge of the ledge holding a big automatic. It was pointed directly at McCann.

"Don't pull any funny stunts, or I'll blast your head right off your shoulders!" the young man said. "Put 'em up, I said."

The man on the ledge was wearing a hat and something on the hat caught McCann's eye. A grin spread over McCann's face, a broad grin. He looked at the grim and set features of the young man and then glanced again at his hat. It was a Marine campaign hat with the familiar globe and anchor of the United States Marine Corps in the center. The bronze insigne gleamed like gold in the early rays of the morning sun.

"Hello, leatherneck," McCann said. "Are you the welcoming committee? Is this the way you greet Americans down here in Mindanao?"

THE Marine's eyes narrowed. He did not lower the gun. The muzzle still covered McCann.

"Talkin' English don't prove nothin'," he said. "How do I know you're American. You might be a Jerry. G'wan, talk some more, and make it fast, too. Talk American. I'll soon find out if you're on the level. I haven't forgotten how it used to sound."

McCann was laughing now. "You're a suspicious duck, aren't you?"

"I gotta be." The Marine's tone was grim. "You may be foolin' but I ain't. I know of a way to cure comics. How are you goin' to prove you ain't a Jerry?"

"Easy," McCann answered. His eyes were twinkling. "Listen to this." And he burst forth into a booming rendition of the Marine Hymn.

By the time McCann had finished the first stanza, the Marine was smiling. He lowered the automatic.

"Where are you from?" he asked in friendlier tones.

"Brooklyn," McCann said. "Leffert Street. From where I lived you could hear the fans over in the ball park tearing down the place on Saturday afternoons."

The young man on the ridge carefully placed his automatic back in its holster. His eyes were sad as he dropped from the ledge to the beach below. He walked slowly toward McCann and stopped about three

feet in front of him. The eagerness with which he looked at McCann brought a tenseness to McCann's throat.

"I had to be sure you wasn't a German," the Marine said. "I haven't laid my eyes on a real American since I escaped from Luzon after the Japs came ashore. I've looked forward to the time when I would see an American again, but now that it's happened."

McCann had noticed the catch in the youth's voice. He was trying desperately to suppress his emotions and keep his words from faltering. Yes, this boy, marooned far from home, on an island of the Philippines, surrounded by savage enemies, had been suffering desperately from homesickness. He missed his friends and news from home. Yet he was trying to be plenty tough about it, trying not to show how he really felt.

McCann thought the most diplomatic procedure would be to ignore these signs. So he made his grin broader than ever, stepped forward and wrung the Marine's hand.

"My name's McCann, soldier," he said. My friends call me Archie and my enemies don't even speak to me."

The Marine laughed.

"I'm Johnnie Smith and I enlisted in Brooklyn. Say, I used to deliver papers on Leffert Street."

McCann nodded. "You haven't seen an American since you left Luzon? How the devil did you ever get way down here?"

A flush of anger spread over the youth's face. His eyes glinted.

"The Japs brought me here," he said. "When they moved in on Luzon, me and two other Marines got captured and they chucked us in a Jap prison camp. I can tell you we caught the hot end of the poker there. Them Japs is mean and hard-boiled and they had it in for us. No clothes, no medical supplies, and no nothin' much, except some wormy rice once in a while when they happened to remember about us. The other two fellers took the malaria and died, and then the Japs transferred me here for safe-keeping, in a little hell ship they was runnin'. After we landed, there was more beatings and abuse. Finally I made a break for it and got away. I've stayed on the loose ever since."

"How long have you been here?"

"I joined up with Rizal about a year ago," the Marine answered. "I couldn't have made out at all if it hadn't been for Rizal."

McCann felt a sudden thrill of exultation.

"Do you know Rizal?" he asked.

"I sure do. He's a great feller." A note of pride came into the Marine's voice. "I been helpin' him drill his men. That is to say—" a shadow crept over his bronzed face "—until the Japs got him."

"Then it's true," McCann said quickly. "The Japs did capture Rizal?"

Smith nodded gloomily.

"Yep. I dunno how it happened. There's something rotten about it. I thought I'd better keep out of sight, too. So I been layin' low myself for a couple of weeks or so. It's mighty strange how them Nips has been pickin' off the Filipino key men. Somebody on the inside has been double-crossin' us."

"Do you know who it is?" McCann asked quickly.

The Marine shook his head.

"Nope. I been tryin' to figure it out but, so far, I ain't hit on the right party or parties. It might be more than one man, you know."

"That's right. Where are you staying, Johnnie?"

"I got a hideout up in the hills." Smith grinned at McCann. "I can take you there. Shall we start?"

"Wait," McCann said. "I have some stuff to cart along. I'll have to dig it up first."

GOING down to the beach together, they recovered McCann's equipment from the sand. As soon as Smith saw the deflated rubber boat, he grew curious so McCann had to tell him that he had been landed from a submarine for the purpose of getting into touch with the guerrilla leaders. Of the mission itself he said nothing and Smith asked no questions.

Loading the equipment on their shoulders, the two men set out for Smith's hideout. They arrived there shortly before noon and spent several hours setting up a short wave radio post. McCann finally got it to working and was lucky in establishing communication with an Allied ship which was standing by awaiting his call.

He reported his safe arrival in the special code and signed off until midnight the next day. Then he talked some more with Smith. The Marine said that he believed the two guerrilla lieutenants, Gonzales and Ferdinando, might be trustworthy.

"How sure are you of them?" McCann asked.

Smith shrugged.

"I ain't sure of anybody," he admitted. "Not now. I just say, mebbe they're all right. They been talkin' about rescuin' Rizal. That seems to show they might be okay. I dunno." He shrugged. "I was plannin' to meet Gonzales and Ferdinando tomorrow."

"Where are you going to meet them?"

"At our old drill grounds, near a little hill about four miles off. I'll show you tomorrow morning."

After a hasty breakfast, the next morning, they started out to meet Gonzales and Ferdinando. As they approached the designated spot, however, Smith and McCann mounted a neighboring hilltop and made a careful survey of the surrounding country. McCann was pleased by the thoroughness of the Marine's inspection. But there was no sign of anything suspicious.

"Nobody but me and you knows about this hill," Smith said. "It pays to be careful. Mebbe it's saved my life a couple of times. Ah, there they are! Ferdinando and Gonzales!"

He pointed. McCann caught a glimpse of two brown figures stealing across a clearing in the jungle.

"Let's go," said the Marine.

They went down a narrow winding path which led through matted tropical growth and finally emerged upon a grassy meadow. Ferdinando and Gonzales were waiting there. Ferdinando was a brown-faced, boney man with greasy black hair. Gonzales was shorter, stout and good-natured looking.

After introductions, Lieutenant Gonzales told the latest news of Rizal.

"General Rizal is in the local jail," he said. He had been tortured but the Japs could not make him speak." He glanced at Ferdinando and shrugged. "I got this information from a village boy. He is one of our spies."

"Is this boy one of your guerrilla band?" McCann asked Gonzales in Spanish.

It was Smith who answered the question. "No. He's one of Rizal's nephews. He's too young to fight and Rizal thought it would be better if we had someone who could enter Butuan without arousing the suspicion of the Japs."

Ferdinando broke into the conversation.

"Rizal was afraid that the spies in our ranks—whoever they may be—would betray his nephew to the Japs," he said. He waved his hands angrily. "Ah, those vile traitors among us! May the smallpox eat up them and their families!"

McCann looked at Smith. "No chance of this cousin being the spy?" the anthropologist asked.

"No, not a chance," the Marine answered.

"Just the same I'd like to meet the nephew," McCann said, after a moment of thought. "Can you bring him in here?"

There were loud objections from the two guerrilla lieutenants at this.

"It would be against Rizal's own orders!" Gonzales protested. "Never is Pedro to know anything about our meeting places or movements. If he never knows anything, then he can reveal nothing, should the Japs torture him."

Smith plucked at the guerrilla lieutenant's sleeve. "My friend could meet Rizal's nephew down the river trail, at the U bend. How about that?"

Smith spoke excellent Spanish. Long association with these men had taught him that.

"Good." Both Gonzales and Ferdinando nodded agreement. "That is wise. At the north end of the U bend."

There was no need for the four men to linger any longer at this place, so the four men started away toward the river trail. As they walked along, McCann questioned both Filipino lieutenants closely regarding the spies in the guerrilla ranks. He obtained

[Turn page]

Many Never Suspect Cause of Backaches

This Old Treatment Often Brings Happy Relief

Many sufferers relieve nagging backache quickly, once they discover that the real cause of their trouble may be tired kidneys.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking the excess acids and waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, a stimulant diuretic, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. Doan's give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills. *(Adv.)*

little useful information. Several men had been under suspicion but nothing had been proved against them. It was Johnnie Smith, the Marine, who finally offered a suggestion.

"Say, Archie," the Marine said in English. "I was just thinkin'. There's one feller who might be a Jap spy. He's got an old father and white haired mother. Both of 'em are sick. So he sneaks in Butuan to see 'em every now and then durin' the night. Mebbe he's the one."

"What gave you the idea he's the spy?" McCann asked.

"Well, yuh see, the Japs have always treated them old folks of his too gentle like," the Marine said. "It ain't natural. That's the very spot where they generally bear down hard. Any of these Filipinos will tell you that. Get what I mean?"

McCann nodded. "I see." He looked thoughtful. "Who is this man. When he isn't out with the guerrillas, what does he do for a living and where does he live?"

"You know the place where you landed?" Smith said. "He has a hut up the beach, about a mile north of there. He does a little shrimp fishing whenever he gets the chance."

McCann's eyes narrowed. This information checked with the theories he already had formed.

"This man could have seen Maru land from the submarine, couldn't he?"

"Yeah, if he'd have been in his hut," Smith answered. "But he was up in the hills at the time. I found out about that."

"But he could have returned, couldn't he, Johnnie?" the anthropologist persisted.

"Sure." The Marine got the point. He also looked thoughtful.

They had arrived at the spot which they had selected for the meeting with Rizal's nephew. One quick glance around told the anthropologist why they had chosen this particular place. From the U turn where they stood there was a clear view of both sides of the river bank and trail for several miles.

Lieutenant Gonzales set off at once to bring Rizal's nephew, Pedro, to them for questioning. If he did turn out to be the traitor, it was an interview which might put a rope around his neck!

McCann felt that at last he was getting somewhere. After the spy was nailed, then he could proceed in accordance with his plans. There was so much to be done that the task seemed almost insurmountable, but past experience had taught him that nothing was impossible when working with willing and courageous helpers.

CHAPTER III

Clutches of the Enemy

ABOUT an hour after they arrived, McCann saw Lieutenant Gonzales and another man approaching the meeting place. Gonzales was ahead. The youth was following him. The trail was uneven and hilly and they had to move slowly in order to avoid the boulders and rough spots.

Johnnie Smith, the Marine, saw them too, a moment later, and pointed them out to the British agent.

"They made it quick," Smith said. "Didn't take 'em long to get here. Look, Pedro's all excited over being called here, sudden like."

McCann paid little attention to Smith's comments. He was scanning Pedro closely. He was a young, good-looking, black haired boy of about seventeen, raggedly garbed. When the two men finally arrived and Pedro had shaken his hand, McCann took a liking to the lad at once. He sincerely hoped Pedro wasn't a spy.

"Senor McCann is another American patriot who has joined us in the hope of freeing General Rizal," Lieutenant Ferdinando explained to Pedro.

"I am glad you are here, Senor," Pedro said. "That is good, yes."

"How many men have the Japanese in Butuan," McCann asked.

"Nearly a thousand men," Pedro answered. "They have many guns. They are expecting our men to try and rescue Rizal. They have set a whole company on guard around the jail."

The five men sat down upon the rocks and entered into a lengthy discussion about the best way to liberate Rizal. Many suggestions were advanced and then abandoned as hopeless. But finally Pedro's eyes brightened.

"I have it," he said. "How about this? The Japanese officer in charge of the garrison at Butuan has a love affair with one of the girls near town. She lives in a house outside of the village and every night he steals out there to see her about midnight. He takes along only one guard who stands outside the house all the time he is there. The guard is a secret policeman, a bloodthirsty wretch."

"This house?" Smith asked. "How far is it from the village?"

Pedro pursed his lips. "About a mile."

McCann began to laugh. "And you say this Jap officer only takes one guard along with him. What's the matter with him? Has he gone crazy?"

Pedro laughed also. "The Japanese may be cunning about many things, but about others they are not clever," the Filipino answered. "The Jap officer thinks no one knows of his love affair and that he is therefore safe. Apparently it has never entered his head we know who it is that visits the girl's home."

McCann glanced at the men around him. "Shall we pay Jap commander a visit and threaten to introduce him to his honorable ancestors? He might—er—be induced to release Rizal."

Smith grinned. "Sounds good," he said in English. "Yeah."

"I'm positive it would work," Pedro said, also in English.

McCann was surprised. "You know English, Pedro?"

"Sure. I graduated from the University of Manila. But the Japs don't know I speak English, too. There are plenty of things the Japs don't know."

"Strikes me the plan might work," Smith said, reverting to Spanish and looking at the two guerrilla lieutenants. "How about it, senores?"

They nodded. "We favor it also," Ferdinando said.

"We might try Ranger tactics," Smith suggested. "I know quite a lot about that stuff. I could show you men plenty of tough ways of fightin', things I learned in the corps."

"I'm always ready to learn new stunts," McCann said with a smile. "Say, maybe I'm too tall to go along. I'm over six feet tall."

"Aw, height doesn't mean a thing," Smith told McCann. "Because, yuh see, Archie, you're usually flat on your tummy when carryin' out things of this kind."

Pedro was grinning with delight. "I'll go with you and show you the way," he said. "If the Japs find out who I am, who cares? I will join the guerrillas. I am old enough now, eh, senores?"

The two lieutenants smiled and nodded.

The plans for the expedition were quickly completed. Pedro was to supply a boat. He had one hidden at the mouth of the river where it entered the bay. Pedro promised to meet them with the boat at a place near Butuan about midnight. Other details were settled. Then the youth departed.

McCann watched him go. Then he shook hands with Ferdinando and Gonzales and started back with Smith to the place where Smith and he had established their camp and where the short wave radio was hidden.

"Pedro is a nice kid, ain't he?" Smith called back over his shoulder as they stepped over vines and rocks on the slippery jungle trail.

"Sure," McCann answered absently. He was pondering about Pedro. "Yeah, Pedro's a nice lad."

WHEN they got back to camp and had eaten a hearty meal from the provisions McCann had brought along with him from the submarine, Smith taught McCann some Ranger fighting tactics. The Marine was surprised at the quickness with which the British secret agent caught on. Then they rested and slept for the rest of the afternoon, ate again and got ready to start for their rendezvous with Ferdinando, Gonzales and Pedro. They met the two guerrilla lieutenants as scheduled and then sat down to wait for Pedro.

Pedro's boat came slipping quietly around the river bend and into the little cove soon afterward. It was about ten o'clock and the night had turned somewhat cool. As McCann eased himself into the boat behind Pedro, he caught a strong odor of perspiration from the Filipino youth. He seemed to be sweating a great deal and to be out of breath. This made the anthropologist rather thoughtful.

"Which way does the river flow, Pedro?" McCann asked the youth. "South?"

"No, senor," the youth answered. "North."

"Then you paddled upstream?" McCann asked.

"No, senor. Against the tide." Pedro had difficulty in speaking. He was out of breath.

McCann scratched his nose. He wondered how far it was to the village of Butuan and if a man could run there, all the way, in the time that Pedro was supposed to be procuring the boat. Had Pedro raced into Butuan to inform the Japs about the expedition? McCann was puzzled. He could not understand why Pedro should be winded or why it was that he was sweating so much. Even a strong tide could not explain that.

Could it be that Pedro kept his boat near the beach for the express purpose of informing the Japs whenever men had been landed from the submarine? He could easily have had an opportunity to observe such landings. McCann was growing more uneasy with every foot they advanced.

His impulse was to call off this expedition to rescue Rizal until these suspicions had

been thoroughly investigated.

They reached the opposite bank at last and landed in a clearing among the matted tropical growth. McCann took Smith by the arm and drew him aside out of hearing of the other three men.

"How well do you know this boy, Pedro?" he asked.

"Why," Smith said, in tones of surprise. "What's eatin' you?"

McCann told the Marine about his suspicions. Before he had finished, he felt certain Smith was grinning. It was too dark to see the Marine's face, but he had an idea this was so. And Smith's answer told him he was right.

"Nothin' to it, Archie," Smith said, with a chuckle. "The kid's okay. Take it from me. He's Rizal's nephew and he wouldn't double-cross us that way. Forget the whole thing."

"What made him so sweaty?"

"Paddlin' against the tide from the sea. It's pretty stiff. I know, because I've done it myself a couple of times."

"Maybe you're right, but I still don't like the set-up," McCann insisted. "I think we ought to postpone this attempt until we've these doubts at rest."

The Marine was silent for a minute or two. Then he spoke out of the darkness.

"Listen, Archie," he said. "Nobody thinks more of his life than I do. If I thought there was any danger from Pedro, I'd back out so quick you couldn't see me for speed. But Pedro's all right. Take it from me."

This settled the matter. By this time Pedro and the other two men had concealed the boat and were starting to call for McCann and Smith in low cautious tones. Without delaying further, McCann and Smith joined them and they set out for the village of Butuan. After they had gone through the jungle for a couple of miles in pitch darkness, they emerged from the trees and Pedro whispered for them to halt.

"We are getting near to the girl's house," the youth said. "We must be very cautious from now on."

"Wait a minute!" It was Smith who had spoken. "Why shouldn't Lieutenants Ferdinando and Gonzales wait here. We don't really need five men to capture one Jap officer and his guard. Then if anything happens to us three, Gonzales and Ferdinando will be free to spread the word and try and arrange for our rescue, also."

"That's sensible," Pedro said quickly. "I favor it."

So did McCann. Gonzales and Ferdinando had some objections but they were soon silenced. A few minutes later McCann and Smith were proceeding down the trail after Pedro, while the two lieutenants remained behind to arrange things in case they did not return.

As the three men approached Butuan they went slower, moving along without the slightest sound. There was a slight breeze. Occasionally moisture dropped down from the huge fronds overhead, making a pattering sound upon the leaves underfoot. Insects, winging through the darkness, thudded into the bodies of the men and mosquitoes buzzed hungrily around the nets that protected their faces.

Once in a while the plaintive calls of night birds broke the deathlike stillness that engulfed the slumbering world. Looking upward, McCann could see the tufted tops of the palm trees limned against the lighter sky.

PEDRO spoke in a whisper. "We are now close to the house," he said.

"Okay," McCann said. "Where is it?"

"About three hundred yards ahead."

"We'll go easy from here on." It was Smith who spoke. "Take only one step at a time and then listen. When we get in sight of the house we'll go flat on our stomachs until I can see the guard. I'll take care of him. He won't get a chance to make a sound."

Their forward movement was uneventful. Suddenly Pedro arrested their advance with a pressure of his hand.

"There is the house," he whispered softly.

They dropped to the ground and moved forward cautiously, single file. They had advanced only about a hundred feet when they were engulfed in a wild maelstrom of men who struck at them savagely. McCann raised his arms protectively—too late!

A blow landed squarely on his temple and he lost consciousness.

McCann regained consciousness a little while later. He found himself, bound hand and foot, in a well-lighted room. Smith was lying on the floor beside him, also a prisoner. Pedro was not in sight.

A grinning Japanese officer in uniform sat at a table on the opposite end of the room.

"So!" The Japanese treated them to a buck-toothed grin. "I am so glad to have honorable Americans. So glad very muchness. Why you come to see humble me, I am unaware, but before long, I know."

He spoke to a guard in Japanese. "Stand them up against the wall."

The guard jerked Smith and then McCann upright and then backed them against the wall opposite the officer. Their feet and hands were so roped it was with difficulty that McCann kept his balance. However, with the wall as a support, he was able to manage it. His head ached unmercifully from the blow he had received.

On the table at which the officer sat a kerosene lamp with a white porcelain shade burned smokily, its rays glinting on a statue of the Mikado carved out of black marble.

McCann and Smith twisted themselves around and faced the officer.

"Japanese very honorable people," the officer continued. "You like tea, yes?" He did not wait for an answer. "Good. Honorable Japanese officer serve tea to unexpectable guests who then give delightful war information to generous host because they so happy to be here."

"Yeah?" growled McCann, despite his buzzing head. "What if happy guests don't give the information?"

The officer spread his hands regretfully.

"If honorable guests refuse, me so sorry too bad," he said. "Me would be so cruel. Nice Japanese officer do not want to expose brutality. Very sorry indeed."

He made a gesture to one of the guards who went out of the room but soon came back with a pot of tea and some cups which he placed on the table. The officer ostentatiously unbuttoned the flap of his pistol holster and drew forth a large blued automatic which he held up for McCann and Smith to see.

"Pardon," he said, in his queer English. "Very wicked gun. Honorable guests be so careful not to commit an escape. Nice Japanese officer not wish to shoot delightable guests who all of a sudden might love to run away. You be most careful, yes?"

Turning to the same guard who had brought the tea, the officer uttered some crackling sentences in Japanese. The brutal looking soldier, who evidently was some kind of a non-commissioned officer, came forward, drew out a knife and cut the ropes which bound McCann and Smith. The officer gave another order and the guards retired, leaving the Japanese officer and the two Americans alone in the room. The officer filled three of the cups with steaming tea and then fingered the automatic ominously.

"Now you drink," he said. "Very nice tea."

"What's the mater with it?" Smith growled.

The officer scowled. Then he lifted one of the cups cautiously with his left hand, still keeping his prisoners covered with the gun, and took a small sip.

"Not poison," he said. "Very lovable tea. Me lovable officer, too. Me Captain Suki."

Slowly McCann advanced to the table with narrowed eyes. His face was set and grim. Smith followed him and then likewise fronted up against the table, on McCann's left side. But the officer was watchful as a cat. He raised the gun again threateningly and his finger tightened upon the trigger.

"No further come," he cried warningly. "Me shoot."

"But you said you wanted us to drink tea," McCann reminded him. "The cups are here on the table."

Smith glanced at McCann sideways and then looked at the seated Jap. His bronzed face was flushed with anger.

"Aw, what's the use of kiddin' this mug," he snapped. "Lookee here, you. We still got some self respect left. We don't drink with dirty rats!"

Captain Suki sucked in his breath at the insult. His Oriental face hardened. He swung the muzzle of the big glinting automatic around until it was centered on Smith's middle.

"You drink or die!" he ordered.

CHAPTER IV

Desperate Chance

FOR several tense moments the tableau held, the two Americans on one side of the table and Captain Suki on the other side, cold and implacable. Then Archie McCann forced a smile and laid a hand on the young Marine's shoulder.

"Calm down, Johnnie," he said soothingly. "Can't you see Captain Suki is really a splendid chap. He's trying to befriend us and a drink of tea wouldn't go so bad, after all. He's just being polite and hospitable."

The enraged Marine turned blazing eyes upon his companion.

"The devil he is," Smith snapped. "I said he was a rat and that goes."

McCann moved his head and looked squarely at Smith. Then his left eye flut-

tered just a trifle, in warning. It was the eye which was hidden from the Jap's observation by his nose and Smith took the hint.

"You've been used to thinking of the Japanese as bad people up to now," McCann went on rapidly. "Perhaps you were mistaken, Johnnie. Perhaps that's just because you never got to know any of them very well. Follow my lead, Johnnie. I am willing to get on friendlier terms."

The Marine nodded and began to grin.

"Yeah, I guess you're right," he said. "Sure. I'd like a cup of swell tea. I'm crazy about tea."

Both Americans turned and smiled in a friendly way at Captain Suki.

The Japanese officer stared at them suspiciously but their smiles were so frank and disarming that he relaxed a little.

"You sit," he commanded. "You drink swell tea. You be sure to like."

Under the threat of the gun, the two prisoners sank cautiously down upon the chairs opposite Captain Suki, carefully pulled the teacups nearer to them. The lamp was on the side near Smith, the ivory statue of the Mikado near McCann at his elbow.

The Japanese officer stared at them for a moment or two. Then he let the hand holding the pistol descend until it was resting on the table. But the muzzle was still pointed in their direction and his finger was still curled around the trigger. He smiled at them menacingly.

"It is most politable for friends to drink tea together," he said. "In Japan all politable friends sop tea in nice paper houses with great civilization." He raised his cup and took another sip of the steaming tea. "Like this."

Both McCann and Smith raised their cups then. The cups were thin and the liquid within them was nearly boiling hot. The tea was so hot, in fact, that Smith hurriedly touched his lips to the cup and then put it down again as fast as he could. Even then he had to cool his fingers by rubbing them against the cloth of his tunic.

But Archie McCann went through the ceremony with more deliberation. He sipped the tea and then slowly returned the cup to the table. It was not a pleasant experience but he had made up his mind if the Jap could stand the scalding tea, he could too.

The ceremony was repeated several times. Finally Captain Suki turned his attention to McCann and smiled again in a way which obviously was intended to be ingratiating.

"Captain Suki has long been known concerning notorious fame of you, honorable guest," he remarked. "You are McCann San, very British agent. Now we will conversing about nice military subjects. You tell when MacArthur plan to make the Philippines invadable by landing so many nice tank, nice gun and supply, yes."

McCann was continuing to sip his tea, lifting the cup at intervals and setting it down again in a steady persistent way which Smith began to find both monotonous and irritating.

The anthropologist shook his head.

"I don't like to talk about that, Captain Suki," he said. "Because if I tell you the right date, the number of men and all that sort of thing, you'd be sure to tell somebody else, and then it would finally get back to my superiors and, by and by, I find myself in a lot of trouble."

Smith, beside McCann, sat quietly without moving, watching the Jap officer. The Marine was waiting for the tea to grow cooler. McCann's wink had warned him that some trick was in prospect. What it might be, Smith did not know, but he had faith in his long, lanky friend.

The flat Mongolian countenance of the Japanese officer reddened with fury. He leaned forward again and lifted the gun slightly.

"You take me for fool?" he snapped. "You think I know you not fool too? Of course I tell my very superior officer. That why I ask you. You try to joke me, you die quick!"

McCann set down his teacup and raised placating hands.

"Take it easy, Captain," he said. "That wasn't what I meant. I just don't want you to tell other American prisoners. I'd like to keep things secret just between us three."

CAPTAIN SUKI'S face cleared. He smiled and hissed politely between his big yellow buck teeth.

"Of a courseness," he said. "I am so agreeable to that. I keep it secret between just us three and Japanese army. You tell us military secret we all love you with a great muchness. You both very lucky prisoner. We put you in swell house, lots food and rice wine, dozen geisha girl who also like you under order without showing how greatly they are hateful to American. Very nice. You tell."

"Fine," McCann said, taking another sip

of tea. "Well, General MacArthur isn't nearly ready to invade yet. But six months from now he'll overrun Formosa. That Philippine stuff won't come until later."

Captain Suki gave a start of surprise. His almond eyes widened in amazement.

"Formosa!" he cried. "Not Philippines? Why?"

McCann set down the tea cup and allowed his elbows to rest on the table as he bent forward deferentially. His right hand was near the black ivory statue of the Mikado. He lowered his voice to an impressive whisper.

"Don't you see?" he asked. "That's the master plan. The Philippine stuff was all a big bluff to throw you Japanese off guard, MacArthur never has had the slightest intention of invading the Philippines. His entire strategy has been to get you Japanese to concentrate your army up there. Then he lands on Formosa, takes you by surprise, and cuts off the Philippines from Japan proper. The lifeline of the Jap Army runs northward to Nippon—"

Captain Suki was completely deceived by the rosy and completely inaccurate picture which McCann was so glibly weaving before his eyes. The Jap's black eyes took on a dreamy expression as his imagination caught fire. It was at this crucial moment that McCann acted.

McCann was a tall, loosely knit man, with a big frame, big hands and big feet. To all outward appearances he was slow easy going and rather lazy. Generally his actions confirmed this impression.

But when necessity arose, he could move almost with the speed of light. Many men has discovered this interesting little fact to their surprise and chagrin. And it was Captain Suki who now was to learn all about it.

With the quickness of a striking cobra, McCann moved. He snatched up the heavy statue of the Mikado and hurled it at the chest of the astonished Jap officer before Captain Suki had a chance even to wink. The statue struck him square on the breastbone with stunning force. The breath whooshed out of his lungs in a sudden gush. He did not have the slightest chance of using the gun.

Captain Suki slowly rolled sideward out of the chair and dropped toward the floor. Before he landed McCann was around the table. He got there just in time to prevent the Jap from hitting the boards with a loud thud. Putting his big hands around Captain Suki's throat, to shut off his wind, he then growled to Smith.

"The statue, Johnnie!" he whispered. "Don't let it fall."

The heavy ivory image had bounced back upon the top of the table and now was rolling perilously close to the edge. Smith managed to catch it just in time and to prevent the heavy statue from dropping to the floor. The noise might have been enough to alarm the guards outside.

McCann soon choked Captain Suki into submission. Before submitting, the Jap made one or two feeble attempts to defend himself with ju-jitsu, but McCann was well versed in those tricks and frustrated them without difficulty. Perhaps if Captain Suki hadn't been so jarred and surprised, he might have put up a better battle, but under the present circumstances he just had no chance at all.

At last, when the Jap was thoroughly scared and subdued, McCann and Smith lifted him up and jammed him roughly back upon the chair from which he had fallen.

"Now are you going to be good, Suki San?" McCann asked him, relaxing just a little the clutch of his powerful fingers upon the windpipe of the strangling Jap. He had moved around until he was standing in back of his helpless victim.

Smith had picked up the automatic which he held ready in his hand. He released the safety catch.

"If you so much as let out a yelp, I'll burn your brains!" the Marine told the Jap.

Still keeping pressure upon Suki's neck, McCann looked at Smith and shook his head.

"Shooting wouldn't stop him," he said. "Neither would a knife. Those are honorable deaths. That's what all Jap soldiers want, an honorable death so they can go right to heaven. It's their bushido code. But strangulation is different. That's not honorable. If he dies by strangling he's doomed to swim for one thousand years in the River of Lost Souls." He leaned over Suki's shoulder and spoke in his ear.

"Remember, if you try to yell, I'll choke you to death," he said warningly to the Jap. Then he loosened his fingers and the frightened captain drew deep gulps of badly needed air into his lungs.

McCANN glanced around the room. Hanging on the wall nearby was a large framed battle map. The British agent spoke to Smith.

"Take that down, unfasten the picture wire and hand it to me," McCann said. "I need

it. Work fast."

The Marine leaped to obey. In a few moments he had handed McCann a long strong twisted strand of the stuff. McCann passed the wire through one of the crevices in the canework back of the chair, pulled the wire around the Jap's throat just above the Adam's apple, and threaded the steel strand through another hole in the cane netting. He tightened the wire by means of a yank on the two loose ends. The Jap's eyes bulged with dread. It was the kind of death he feared most. It would not take him to heaven.

"Do not choke," Captain Suki pleaded. "Me give up."

"You won't struggle?" McCann asked.

"No struggle," the Jap groaned. "No yell. Choke death not bushido."

Both McCann and Smith grinned at each other in triumph.

"That's bully," McCann said. "Now, listen, Suki San. We have plans for you. I understand that you have captured the Filipino Rizal and that you are holding him prisoner?"

Suki shook his head.

"No understand."

The British agent gave a tug at the wires until Suki's eyes bulged again. Then McCann switched his language and talked to the Jap rapidly, fluently. Suki's face betrayed surprise.

"You know Jap language?" he said.

McCann smiled.

"Of course," he answered in Japanese. He repeated what he had said about Rizal. "I want you to call the guard and have Rizal brought in here," McCann went on. "Then you must order the guard to leave Rizal in this room alone with us. If you cry out or warn the guard in any way, you will die by choking. Understand?"

The Jap officer objected feebly.

"Rizal is dead," he said. Volubly he assured McCann that Rizal had died of wounds which he had received at the time of his capture. Like all Japanese, Captain Suki had trouble in pronouncing his "l's." To Suki, Rizal's name was "Rizar."

McCann rejected the idea that Rizal had died. He knew better.

At this point, Smith intervened.

"Wait a minute," he said. "When the guard comes in through that door, he'll have a beautiful view of what you're doing from a side view. Just as soon as he notices you holding that wire, with the loop around Suki's neck, it'll be all up with us."

McCann smiled at the Marine reassuringly.

"Not if we move the chair around facing the door," the anthropologist said. "The guard can't see the wire then. It'll be concealed by the honorable captain's chin. Suki is honorable, you know, Johnnie. He said so himself. When the guard shows up, he'll be sitting there, facing the door, all nice and relaxed. I'll be standing across from him, very respectful and all that.

"But you won't be in sight. You'll be crouched down in behind the high back of the chair, holding on to the wires. At the first sign of treachery, Johnnie, you will at once send Suki San to his honorable ancestors—that is to say—if there are any swimming around in the River of Lost Souls." He looked at the Jap officer. "Do you get that, Captain?"

Captain Suki comprehended very well indeed. This he revealed by his pallor and his expression of terror.

"Give me that gun," McCann said to Smith. "Then hide in behind the chair and get ready. I'm going to call in the guard."

The Marine had chanced to see an object leaning in a corner near Captain Suki's chair. It was a Sumurai sword in a dark leather scabbard, apparently the property of Captain Suki.

"Hold on," the Marine said. He walked over, picked up the sword and drew the weapon from its sheath. The black blade was slightly curved, splendidly tempered and as sharp as a razor. Smith tried the edge gently with his thumb.

Smith came back, handed the automatic to McCann. Getting in behind the Jap's high-backed chair out of sight, he called out.

"All set," he said, and grabbed hold of the wire strands as McCann released his hold on them.

The British agent took a position on the other side of the table across from Captain Suki as planned. He looked at the Jap officer.

"Remember, no trickery!" he warned. "Now call in the guard."

Captain Suki lifted his voice and yelled a harsh command in Japanese. Then the three men waited, each with beating heart and each with differing emotions, for the guard to make his appearance.

Everything depended on the naturalness of the scene. That meant it depended on Captain Suki's terror of death. But not only his life depended on carrying out the trick. The lives of the others also depended on it.

CHAPTER V

Hostage for Sapin

HARDLY had the sound of Suki's voice died away, when the door of the room popped open and one of the guards came marching in. It was the same man who had brought the tea and who had cut the ropes. He snapped to attention just inside the door and gave Captain Suki a smart salute which the officer returned. Smith, of course, could not be seen. McCann was standing at one side of the table, holding the pistol out of sight in behind his leg.

He listened carefully to what Suki said. The officer's voice trembled a bit but he gave his orders in a sharp, clear tone. The guard departed, closing the door after him. Suki rolled his eyes toward McCann.

"My honor," he said woefully. "She is blackened around edges."

The anthropologist stared back at him with unconcealed dislike.

"Your honor," he said, "will shrivel up and die completely if you don't do what we say. What place is this, anyway? It isn't outside Butuan, is it?"

The officer's eyes gleamed vengefully. "You in center of Butuan. You not get out Butuan alive, none of you."

This information was a jolt to McCann who, however, managed to conceal his feelings from the Jap. The situation was grave, as the officer had said. They were surrounded by enemy troops.

McCann was scowling over this when he noticed Smith, the Marine, grinning at him from in behind Suki's chair.

"Trouble is due in bunches," the British agent said to the Marine. "I'll bet when Rizal is brought here, he'll have a whole flock of guards with him. I should have thought of that and made arrangements with Suki San. It would have been easy for Suki to have told them to send Rizal in here alone. Now things may be tough. How about it, Johnnie?"

"If we have bad luck, palsy-walsy Suki's in for worse," Smith promised grimly. "Yes, sir. I'll just naturally twist this lug's head off with my wire. I ain't kiddin' either."

It was about ten minutes before the Jap soldiers appeared with Rizal. McCann and Smith had plenty of time to prepare for their approach as they heard the heavy tramp of feet out in the hall before they opened the door.

Two of the guards were handcuffed to the Filipino patriot leader. Another Jap, a large, brutal looking animal, had hold of a short rope with a slip noose which was around Rizal's neck. The fourth guard, the one who McCann had seen before, took a position nearby, and grimaced with delight at the other soldiers' brutality.

All four Japanese soldiers came to attention, waiting orders from their commander. Rizal remained where he was, in an attitude of dejection. He was a small, wiry man, about sixty years old, with gray hair. His wrinkled face was puffed and discolored. It was obvious he had been beaten repeatedly. His ragged uniform was matted with filth and hung from his frame in tattered rags.

The Jap soldier holding the slip-noose evidently had keener eyes than his comrades for he cried out a sharp warning in Japanese. He had noticed the wire around Captain Suki's neck.

McCann knew the game was up. He raised his automatic and covered the astonished Japanese soldiers.

"Don't move!" he cried, in Japanese. "If you attempt a rescue, Captain Suki will die a dishonorable death. The man in behind his chair will throttle him to death." Then in English, he called out to Smith, "Tighten up, Johnnie."

The Marine yanked vigorously. Captain Suki's mouth popped open and his tongue began to protrude in a ghastly fashion.

Suki's personal orderly stared at the sight in horrid fascination.

"We will be good," he promised in Nipponese. "Spare the honorable Sumurai!"

"Loosen up, Johnnie," McCann called in English. The Marine slackened the wire and Suki, drawing in his breath in anguished relief, managed to say a few words.

"Obey the white men," he quavered. "I am at their mercy! Oh, my ancestors!"

"Tell them not to move, Suki San," McCann said to Suki. "Isn't that what you want them to do? Obey?"

"Hai, so des," the officer gasped weakly. (Yes, it is so.)

McCann also spoke to the Japs in their own language.

"Release your prisoner," he commanded. "Then pile all your weapons at one side of the room, and line up along the wall."

Rizal was completely dumbfounded by what had taken place. As soon as the ropes which fastened his hands behind his back had been removed, a delighted smile overspread his face.

"Who are you?" he asked McCann in Spanish.

"I'm Archie McCann of the British Intelligence Service," McCann answered. "Never mind the rest. You'll learn all about it later." The Jap soldiers had piled their weapons and now were crossing the room again. They lined up as he had directed. "Now face the wall."

McCann glanced at Rizal.

"Now frisk 'em. You know, search 'em for weapons. If they try any tricks I'll open up with this gun."

RIZAL was only too glad to obey. He handled his ex-guards roughly. It was easy to see he resented the treatment they had given him. Finally he turned to McCann and spread his hands wide apart. "Clean, eh?" McCann glanced toward the pile of weapons. "Help yourself to a couple of automatics—there are several over in that heap—and hand me another one. Then we'll settle what to do with all that extra hardware."

"Why not put the spare weapons in the vault?" Rizal suggested.

McCann was surprised.

"Vault?"

"Yes." Rizal nodded. "This is the mayor's room of the Town Hall. The village records were kept in here. The vault is of steel and very strong."

Rizal stepped across the room and opened a door which, until now, McCann had believed opened into a closet. Behind the wooden door was a heavy steel door with a combination lock.

The Filipino twisted vainly at the steel handle and glanced over his shoulder at McCann.

"It is locked," he said.

McCann approached Captain Suki who was still sitting motionless in the chair, held there by the wire strand around his neck. Johnnie Smith had straightened up and was standing in back of the Jap officer, grinning down at him.

"What is the combination?" McCann asked Suki. Suki did not answer. There was an ugly expression upon his flat face.

"So sorry," he chanted. "Do not know."

Suddenly he gave a startled jump and uttered a sharp cry of anguish.

"Hai, hai!" he shrieked. "Watakushi wa —hai! Hai!"

Frantically the officer tried to lift his squirming body out of the chair but the wire held him down, firmly in place. Both McCann and Rizal gazed at these frenzied struggles with an astonishment which they made no effort to conceal.

Smith was the only one present who did not seem to be at all surprised. He continued to gaze down calmly into the Jap officer's face.

Then McCann guessed the answer. He grinned.

"What was it?" he asked Smith. "Epilepsy?"

"No, sworditis." The Marine was still holding onto the wire with his right hand. He lifted his other hand and revealed that the naked sword of the Jap was still in his possession. "I just rammed this into his sitterino. Not all the way, just a couple of inches. Gosh, didn't he make a fuss." He winked at Rizal. "Glad to see you again, chief. Didn't I tell you we'd come stage a rescue if the Japs caught you?"

Captain Suki was thoroughly frightened again. He told the combination to McCann without any hesitation. McCann found the vault littered with rubbish and torn record books. Rizal and he quickly piled the rifles and knives inside. Then McCann had another inspiration. The four Jap guards were quickly herded into the vault also and the door was locked upon them. The anthropologist knew that they would be rescued long before there was any danger of them smothering to death, although he was not particularly worried about their safety.

"Now let's all get out of here," McCann said.

Under orders from McCann, Captain Suki was released from the chair and boosted to his feet by Smith. Then McCann took one of his arms and Smith the other.

"Suki San, we're going to take you along to safeguard us through the Japanese lines," McCann said. "In order that my friends may understand what is going on, I'll speak in English and you are to answer in English. Understand?"

Captain Suki indicated that he understood. "Where is Pedro?" McCann asked the Jap. "You know, the young man who was sneaking through the brush with us when we were captured?"

"He mostest smart," Suki said in his queer lingo. "Pedro not capture by nice Jappanee."

Smith waved the Samurai sword before his

eyes. "Talk straight," he said. "If you lie, you can guess where this will go! All the way, this time."

Suki shivered.

"I speak true!" he yelled. "All time I never lie."

"Where's Sapin?" McCann demanded.

"No need to ask him," Rizal put in. "I know where Sapin is. They've got him over in a prison camp, over at one edge of the village. They're holding him as hostage for the good behavior of his relatives, the Moros."

"So that's the set-up," McCann snapped. He tightened his grip on Suki's arm. "I've got a plan. Let's go."

But Captain Suki had different ideas. He began to resist, to hold back.

"Wait," he cried in Japanese. "I make a deal with you. Let me go free and I will see that Sapin is liberated unharmed. I will trade myself for Sapin and will pay you much gold, too. I have plenty of gold."

McCANN frowned. "Oh, you have, eh?" He turned to Smith and Rizal. "He says he'll pay us a fortune in gold if we'll let him go free. And Sapin will be released, too. How about it boys? Do you think its worth trying?"

Rizal chuckled.

Despite the fact that he had been tortured and mistreated, the Filipino's courage was still high.

"I'll bet a cocoanut husk it's American gold," he remarked. "They looted the banks, you know."

"Wonder where he keeps it," Smith said. "Gold! Gosh, I ain't been on speakin' terms with real money for so long I forgot what a dollar looks like."

"The devil with the gold," McCann snapped. "Let's liberate Sapin." He glanced at Smith. "Get that picture wire from the chair."

Smith moved across to the chair and pulled the steel strand out of the wicker netting where he had left it. Then he happened to notice that the drawer of the table, where Suki had been sitting, was part way open. Smith pulled it all the way open and took a look.

"Gosh, American cigarettes!" he cried. Reaching into the drawer, the Marine took out several packages and stuffed them into his pocket and then called out to McCann. "Got any matches, Archie?" he asked.

"No. Look in the drawer. Maybe you'll find some."

The Marine pulled the drawer further out. "Yeah. Here's a whole box full of book matches." He thrust a handful of packets into the pocket of his blouse. He returned to Captain Suki and adjusted the picture wire around the Jap's neck, this time in the form of a slip-noose and tried the contrivance out. Once more Suki's face turned purple and his eyes bulged. The Marine loosened up on the wire.

"That works fine," he said. "Now, Brother Nip, I've got the hang of this thing. So be a good feller if you don't want your head cut off."

Suki's complexion had turned a sickly yellow.

"I be very, very law abiding," he promised. "Do not choke, please, and thanks very much indeed."

McCann and Rizal were waiting impatiently. McCann made sure that his two automatics were ready for quick use in case there should be trouble.

"Rizal, have those two guns of yours handy," he said. "We may have to shoot our way out. Smith, you walk behind him and keep the noose good and snug. I don't think the Japs will notice it if we move fast. I'll hold him by the right arm. Now let's get started. Are you all set?"

Both Rizal and Smith said they were ready and the party started out of the room and down the hall.

The guard in front of the city hall stared in astonishment as he saw the officer and the three men cross the porch and come down the steps. His bewilderment increased when Suki told him to go on walking his post and to keep his eyes off his commanding officer. Hesitatingly the guard turned and walked away. Rizal, who knew the town well, gave quiet directions and the group disappeared into the darkness of the night. Several more outposts were encountered, but the officer quickly quieted his men with abrupt and emphatic orders.

Soon they were well past all danger from the outer defense posts. Rizal called a halt.

"We are safe now," he announced. "What next?"

"Let's park Suki San some place until we can get Sapin away from the Japs," McCann suggested.

"We'll blindfold Suki first," Smith said.

Using Suki's own shirt, the Marine proceeded to do an expert job. Then he whirled the Jap around and motioned silently for McCann and Rizal to change their positions so that Captain Suki would be confused.

"Let's head west until we get to the Gingood river," the Marine said. "We can use the boat there. This mug'll be safe across the river."

He winked at McCann and started in a northeasterly direction back toward Pedro's boat on the Agusan River. McCann grinned approvingly in the darkness.

When they arrived at the Augusan River, they found that Pedro's boat had disappeared.

Dawn was just breaking.

"Keep Suki quiet a spell," McCann ordered. "Rizal and I have got things to talk about."

Rizal and McCann moved out of Captain Suki's hearing.

"I haven't told you why I'm here on Mindanao, General Rizal," McCann said. As briefly as he could he outlined part of the things which Jason French had told him, just enough to enable the guerrillas to cooperate with General MacArthur when he would invade Leyte, two weeks hence.

It was still too dark to see Rizal's face, but from the way he acted the British agent could tell he was delighted.

"That's fine," the Filipino chief kept saying. Then he asked a sudden question. "Where is Pedro? He was with you when you two started out to rescue me and were captured. Where do you think he went?"

"I don't know," McCann said. "I was going to ask you the same thing."

"I don't like it," the guerrilla chief said. "But maybe it's all right. Up to now the boy's been trustworthy. We've never had any reason to suspect him. Perhaps he's with Ferdinando and Gonzales?"

"I shall be interested in hearing his story," McCann remarked. There was a peculiar glint in his eye. The light around the two men was growing better now. Over the tops of some palm trees the sun was coming up in a glow of crimson fire It was another quick dawn.

This was the tropics.

"There's a boat near here," Rizal said. "It's up the river away. We can cross to the other shore."

"In daylight?" McCann asked.

"Yes. It's too early for the Japs to be out."

They walked back to the place where Smith was guarding their prisoner. Captain Suki was looking more frightened now than ever.

All four men went on to the river. Rizal found the dugout in some thick bushes. They shoved the boat into the water.

CHAPTER VI

The Traitor

SMITH and Rizal seized paddles and hurriedly began to propel the dugout through the swift tide. The current now was running north toward the open sea. They landed safely on the other shore and headed toward the drill grounds, high up in the hills, with Captain Suki still in their midst.

When they reached the vicinity of the guerrilla meeting place, they began to catch glimpses of hurrying Filipinos who were assembling from all directions, in answer to the call they had received.

The four men reached the drill ground without important incident. A sentinel, standing guard there, stared at Rizal, openmouthed.

"Juan!" Rizal called to him. "I am back!"

In certain ways the discipline of a guerrilla band is strict, but in other ways, due to the peculiar nature of such an organization, an easy informality exists.

The guard let out a wild shout, leaned his rifle up against a rock, rushed forward and fervently wrung Rizal's hands.

"They said you were captured!" he cried. "This is more than we hoped. You are free!"

Rizal laughed with the delight. "Are Lieutenants Gonzales and Ferdinando here?" he asked, when the man's enthusiasm had subsided somewhat.

"Yes, and your cousin, Pedro, also."

"Ah!" Rizal's face hardened. He turned and looked at McCann.

The sentinel ran on ahead to announce Rizal's arrival to the men at the drill grounds. Rizal was welcomed heartily. Pedro, with tears streaming down his face, fell on Rizal's neck and gave thanks to God that he had escaped.

"We'll leave Captain Suki with you, Rizal," McCann announced. "Use him as a trade for Sapin. Tell Suki when he delivers Sapin to you, unharmed, you will set him free. Now take him away and tie him up. I'll give full instructions later."

"I will send a messenger to Butuan to negotiate with the Japanese," Rizal replied.

"Why not send Pedro?" McCann suggested quickly.

"Oh, no!" Pedro broke in. "I would not

like that."

"Did any one recognize you last night?" McCann asked.

"No. But there is too much danger now."

"Give Pedro a cigarette, Sergeant," McCann said. "The poor fellow is all upset."

Smith pulled one of the packages of cigarettes which he had obtained at the headquarters of the Japs in Butuan, from the breast pocket of his blouse and offered one to Pedro. The Filipino youth saw that the brand was American and snatched the cigarette eagerly.

Smith would have offered a match, too, had not McCann stopped him with a gesture. McCann was watching Pedro intently.

The Filipino reached into his trouser pocket, pulled out a book of matches, tore off one and lighted his cigarette. McCann looked at the pack of matches as the young man returned them to his pocket. Then he smiled at Pedro.

"We won't insist on your going to Butuan if you're really afraid, Pedro," McCann said.

Some guerrilla guards were taking Captain Suki away to a hidden cave for safekeeping. McCann waited until they were gone before turning to Rizal.

"General," he said. "We've got to send somebody else into Butuan instead of Pedro. He's sure it's too dangerous for him to go. Let's go some place where we can talk it over." He glanced at Smith. "I'll want you in on this, Johnnie. You, too, Pedro."

The four men strolled away until they were some distance from the rest of the guerrillas and out of earshot. Then McCann confronted Pedro with blazing eyes.

"Your number's up, Pedro!" he cried, harshly, in English. "Captain Suki confessed everything. He says you're the traitor."

Pedro's mouth opened spasmodically. He tried to speak, but no words came forth. Keeping his eyes on the startled youth, McCann reached into Pedro's pocket, drew forth a book of matches. He handed them to Smith.

"Are these matches the same as those you took out of Suki's desk?" he asked.

"Yeah," the Marine said. "Same color, same printed advertising. Look." He pulled more packs of matches from his pockets and handed them to McCann and Rizal. "They're identical twins!" He swung around and glared at Pedro. "You dirty double-crosser!"

LIKE a flash, Pedro reached for his gun but McCann had been expecting that. His long arms flew out before Pedro completed the draw. He exerted his muscles and worked a wrestling trick. Pedro's feet went flying into the air. The next instant he was lying flat on his back in the long grass.

"Take his gun, Johnnie," McCann cried, as he knelt down on the struggling youth's chest.

The Marine bent over. Then he straightened up with the Filipino's gun in his grasp.

Rizal had been watching, too surprised to move.

McCann yanked Pedro to his feet and bound his hands behind his back with a scarf which he took from around Pedro's waist. The youth was chattering with fear, sweating profusely.

Rizal continued to stare at him.

"Is this true, Pedro?" he asked reproachfully.

Pedro was unable to speak. His gaze dropped and he turned deathly pale. He began to weep.

"I'm afraid he's guilty," McCann said gently. "I'm sorry, General Rizal."

"Ah!" That was all the patriot leader said. Suddenly he looked very old.

McCann proceeded to question Pedro, as Rizal and Smith stood there, listening. The Marine didn't say anything, or offer any comments, but his face was gloomy, too. Like all the rest, he had liked Pedro.

The traitor's spirit was gone. Under McCann's searching examination, he broke down and confessed everything. He freely admitted he had been giving information to the Japs for months, that he had been the one who had sent the New Guinea scouts to their deaths, and that he had led McCann and the others into a Jap trap the night before.

As the story unfolded, General Rizal was amazed by the perfidy of his cousin. His sorrow began to change into anger.

"Why did you do such a thing?" he demanded with flashing eyes.

Pedro was reluctant to answer that, but McCann kept after him without mercy. Then the true story came out.

Pedro had always been jealous of his uncle, who was a wealthy man. He had always been poor. He had longed for money and luxurious life. From birth he had hated the Americans, too, and easily accepted the Jap propaganda when they had landed on the island. He had thought Japan would conquer and that he could obtain a lucrative post and wealth under them. Consequently he had opened negotiations and had ac-

cepted their gold, gold which the Japs had taken by looting American banks.

Before he had finished talking, the vindictive glances which he directed toward Rizal revealed how much he had hated the patriot.

At last Rizal cut him short.

"Pah!" the patriot said. "I will hear no more. This is disgusting. Come, we will turn him over to the guards. He deserves to die."

They moved back to the rest of the guerrillas.

Pedro had been led away by two armed men. Then McCann and General Rizal settled the details of the negotiations which would be carried out with the Japs for the exchange of Captain Suki for General Sapin. Rizal was certain the Japs would accept. They considered Suki a valuable officer and his family had much influence back in Japan. These details finished, Smith and McCann conducted Rizal to the little camp which they had established in the heart of the jungle, the day before. They showed the guerrilla chief the radio set, its powerful transmitter and delicate receiver. Rizal promised to send down to the beach and bring in the spare batteries which they had left cached there.

Plans for cooperation of the guerrillas with the American forces during MacArthur's invasion of the Philippines were thoroughly discussed. McCann told him the rest of the details which he had held back until he had a chance to make sure that Rizal was trustworthy.

The Filipino leader was almost speechless with delight.

"The invasion at last!" he cried in awed tones. "Ah, the months I have waited to hear this news. The hopes we have had, the disappointments. I am a new man, now, Senor McCann. I can even forget the perfidy of Pedro. The Philippines are to be free!"

McCann left him rejoicing, went over to the radio transmitter, and sat down on the ground before the key. Steadily, with practiced fingers, he began to send out a call. That call was, perhaps, one of the most important ones that was ever transmitted during the war with Japan.

It had to do with the success of this mission to Mindanao.

It was some time before he got an answer. But at last the code word came into the headset on his ears. To McCann it was like a welcome from home.

McCann swung the key gently under his thumb. Steadily the code went out into the lanes of the air, words the Japs could not understand, words that meant so much!

Then he signed off. Getting up, he walked back to Rizal and Smith, and stood looking down at the seated Filipino.

"It is time for me to go," he announced. "The PT boat will call for me, at the beach within a couple of hours. I must be there to meet it."

RIZAL rose off the boulder where he had been sitting, his eyebrows lifted in surprise.

"You go?" he exclaimed. "Ah, I did not know. I had no idea of that. I thought you were to stay until after the invasion."

McCann laughed.

"Oh, no. I'm a member of the British Intelligence Service and I am under orders just like any other soldier. I would like to stay. I wish I could. But there are other missions which I must carry out." He waved his hand toward the radio set. "You told me you had competent operators. You have a code book in your camp. We have settled all that before."

The patriot leader shrugged and sighed.

"Ah, yes. But I did not realize. I admire you, Senor McCann. You are clever man. I could use your sage advice. But of course, duty is duty and must be obeyed. However, I will accompany you to the beach."

Johnnie Smith rose slowly to his feet also. The burly Marine's face was a study of conflicting emotions. All his homesickness, all his loneliness was back in his sunblackened countenance. But he struggled not to show it. He was trying to be hard-boiled again. He was trying to be a good Marine.

"I guess I'll go along too," he said carelessly. "There ain't no use in me hangin' around here, is there, Archie?"

The British agent grinned at him.

"By all means come along," he said. "I wouldn't think of leaving you behind to twiddle your thumbs."

The journey down to the water's edge where McCann had landed and buried the rubber boat did not seem long. McCann and Rizal had much to discuss. Johnnie Smith trudged along behind them, gloomy and silent.

With the surf foaming a short distance from their feet, they sat down on a sand dune, near the rock ridge where McCann

had first become acquainted with Smith. McCann expected the PT boat to appear at any moment.

"Say, Archie," Smith said suddenly. "I been wonderin' about somethin'. Back there in that Jap room, when you chucked that statue at the Nip captain, I was watchin' you all the time, but I didn't see you move. Neither did he. How'd you do it? I'd often heard that the hand was quicker than the idea, but I'd never seen it work before."

McCann laughed.

"The hand is not quicker than the eye," he said. "That's a lie. It's just sucker talk, Johnnie, started by pitchmen at carnivals, years ago. It's been repeated so often people have grown to believe it. I just threw the statue at Suki, that's all."

The Marine shook his head stubbornly.

"I tell you I seen it. I was watchin' you all the time, and you moved faster than my eye could follow. Suki was fooled also. He was studyin' you like a hawk."

McCann continued to smile.

"You never studied magic—parlor magic—did you, Johnnie?"

"Don't know a thing about it," the Marine admitted.

"Well, if you had, you'd understand," McCann said. "The trick I used was what stage magicians call 'misdirection.' Misdirection is just a form of good acting, a stall to take the attention of the person you intend to deceive off of what you intend to do and divert it to something else. For instance, if I want to slip a card into my trouser pocket, I make a quick motion with my other hand and you're so busy watching the motion, that you forget to watch the card.

"Houdini once said he could bring an elephant on the stage in view of the entire audience without anyone noticing it. No other magician disputed that. They knew it was true. As for me, I used misdirection. I sipped tea."

Smith's face lighted up with comprehension.

"I get you!" he said. "You nearly drove me wild with that teacup, hoisting it up and down. It was sure aggravatin'."

"Ah!" McCann laughed again.

At this moment several men came out of the jungle, looked up and down, saw Rizal and came hurrying forward. Rizal sprang to his feet and advanced to meet them. McCann and Smith had also recognized them. They were Lieutenant Gonzales and a couple of guerrillas.

Rizal talked with them briefly, then returned with his lieutenant.

"It's all right," Rizal called out happily. "The Japanese have accepted our terms. The exchange is now being made. General Sapin is safe again in patriot hands. Our men are now taking Captain Suki into the Jap lines. They are paying much gold to us, also. It is wonderful news."

"I knew it'd be all right," McCann answered, smiling into his happy face.

Smith tugged at McCann's sleeve.

"There's the PT boat," he said.

McCann and the rest gazed seaward. Far out a great motorboat had appeared from around a point and was heading in for the beach where they were standing. For a few minutes they watched it come in silence.

"You're sure you know where the rubber boat and all the rest of the supplies are buried?" McCann asked Rizal.

THE leader nodded.

"Yes, you pointed it out when we arrived here. I won't forget." He cleared his throat. "There is just one more thing which puzzles me, Senor. I hate to mention it, a delicate subject. It concerns Pedro. How did you first come to suspect him?"

"It was in the boat, that night, when we crossed the river," the British agent said. "Pedro was out of breath and sweating hard. It was dark, and yet I could smell and hear him panting. Not from his exertions of pulling against the tide, surely, because he told me himself the tide was running with him from the place where he had come."

"But the book matches? What made you think of that."

McCann shrugged. The sound of the motor from the PT boat was loud in their ears now. It was close in.

"When Pedro lighted his cigarette at the drill field, I noticed they were the same as the ones Smith got at Jap Headquarters," McCann said. "That confirmed my suspicions he was connected in some way with Captain Suki."

"You have good eyesight," Rizal remarked. It was the same thing Major Brown had said to McCann in the hospital at Morotai.

"I notice little things," the anthropologist replied. "I must, in my business. Sometimes little things can mean the difference between life and death."

The PT boat came through the surf and up on the beach with a rush. Sailors jumped out of it, knee deep in the waves and held

the boat against the rush of receding water. The two Filipinos who had accompanied Gonzales dashed into the ocean, splashing, yelling and laughing, to help them.

McCann shook hands with Gonzales, then seized Rizal's hand and wrung it heartily.

"Thanks for the hospitality," McCann said. "I'm glad to have met you, general. I will see you again, after the invasion. That'll be soon, I hope."

"Very soon. It's been wonderful, the hope you've given us and what you've done. Good voyage, Senor."

A Naval officer stood up in the stern of the boat and yelled angrily at McCann.

"Come on, you blasted blight on the face of the earth! Do you think we want to stay here all day? Make it snappy!"

It was Lieutenant Saunders, a good friend of Archie McCann. McCann waved a greeting.

Rizal motioned toward the boat.

"Aren't you afraid to do this in daylight?" he asked McCann.

"Not at all. The Japs are too busy worrying about Captain Suki to bother us. We're safe."

While this was going on, Johnnie Smith had been standing near McCann, not uttering a word, waiting to say goodby. He was homesick, oh, so homesick! He wanted to see his friends. McCann ignored him. He got into the PT boat. Then he stood up and turned around.

"Johnnie!" he yelled. "What are you waiting for? Don't you want to go along with me? Get in!"

"Can I?" Smith yelled in stentorian tones. His face was radiant. "Can I?"

"That's what I planned all along. The Marines need all the goldbricks they can get."

"Goldbrick?" Smith shouted angrily, his face red with happiness. "You callin' me a goldbrick?" He climbed into the boat just as the sailors launched it. It floated. It started to swing around toward the open sea. Smith eyed McCann belligerently. "I've a notion to bash your face in!"

McCann stuck his jaw close to Smith's red countenance just as belligerently.

"Go ahead and bash it."

"For two cents I would."

Then both men laughed and pounded each other on the shoulders. They turned and gazed back at the beach. Rizal, Gonzales and the others were standing there, waving.

"So long, General!" Smith bawled.

Rizal's hand went up again, high. The PT boat's motors began to roar.

"So long!" Rizal called out. "So long, amigos, and God bless you!"

The PT boat picked up speed and headed for the distant horizon.

"Stop! Stay Still, All of You— or I'll Shoot!"

BILL DACEY saw the shapes of struggling men against the gray blanket of mist—and then dragged his police positive free and shouted the command.

A bulky man rushed toward him. Before Dacey could use it for a club, something swished down through the fog and caught him alongside the head. It was a glancing blow but it made him give way at the knees. From a great distance away he heard the sound of running feet, the racing of a car engine. He pulled himself up, his head swimming.

When his head cleared, he was trying not to believe something he had seen. A face in the fog. The face of Judge Asa Calvin! Where did the judge fit into all this?

It became more mysterious, a few moments later, when Bill Dacey discovered the corpse—and the tell-tale marks that pointed to Judge Calvin as the killer! That started Dacey on the most baffling and exciting trail of his life in DEATH HAS A POKER FACE, a novelet by Robert S. Fenton that is packed with thrills. Look forward to it—in the next issue!

Reflected in the glass, Carol Saw Dan Harrison

MUD

By BILL ANSON

When Joe Richards' wife finds cemetery dirt on his shoes, she fears he's either a murderer—or death's next victim!

THE BREAKFAST table was no place to ask embarrassing questions. Auburn-haired Carol Richards knew that although she had been married only six months. But her husband's actions the night before had been so odd—so mysteriously strange—that she couldn't help asking about them.

Why had he sneaked out of their beautiful home in Greenwich in the dead of the night, and returned just before dawn covered with gray mud?

"Joe," Carol began, attempting to hide her nervous curiosity, "I understand that no woman in the world can compete with a morning newspaper, but why—"

"Oh, yes, darling!" Joe Richards looked up from the Tribune with a start. "I forgot

all about the time. And there was something I wanted to show you before driving to the station."

He smiled like a mischievous boy as he jumped up from the breakfast table. Richards was a handsome man with twinkling blue eyes and unruly brown hair. He was built like a college halfback, but at Carol's persuasion, he had given up brown tweeds and gray flannels for double-breasted blue suits, which were more becoming an insurance company junior executive.

Carol herself had been one of the more beautiful brides of the past season, married to Joe Richards after a whirlwind courtship. Born of a good family that had lost its money, Carol hadn't had the advantages of a finishing school, but she was accepted socially in fashionable Greenwich, and she was making friends rapidly with the wealthier set. That helped Joe's business. Greenwich forgot she had once been a New York model.

Now, as her husband left the breakfast room, Carol Richards couldn't help but wonder if there were not hidden depths to his character that she had not suspected. Friends had warned her that Joe had a flair for wild adventures and that he often got himself into serious trouble. He had been a commando in the war, and she knew that hardly a week passed but some old comrade phoned him to go on a spree. Was that what had happened last night?

JOE RICHARDS returned to the breakfast room with a small, black velvet bag.

"It's not a present, sweetheart," he said, his golf-tanned features cut in a grin. "So don't get excited. I want you to wear these when the Conways and the Harvisons come to dinner. Hold your breath."

And he drew a magnificient string of pearls from the black velvet bag and dropped the necklace into Carol's uplifted hands.

"Joe!" she cried in amazement. "They're worth a fortune—if they're real!"

"They're real, all right. Worth a king's ransom. Don't ask me where I got them. Take them upstairs and try them on. Then put them in the wall safe in your dressing room. But what's important, Carol. Don't let anybody know you've got them!"

"But Joe—"

"No but about it, my pet. Just don't tell a soul."

"But you can't drop a fortune into my hands like this and not explain."

"Oh, yes, I can," Joe Richards answered her. "Those pearls haven't been worn in over a year. You know the old story—that pearls lose their luster if not worn. They demand the warmth of a beautiful woman in order to retain their own beauty. You are that woman, sweetheart."

"How nice of you to say so, Joe, but where did you get them?"

"I've got to run for the train." Joe Richards glanced at his wrist watch. "See you at six. And listen carefully, Carol. You can play with the necklace after I'm gone. But don't be wearing it when the Conways and the Harvisons arrive. Wait until just before you sit down to the dinner table to put it on."

"What a shame to waste such beautiful pearls on those ugly Harvisons, Joe."

"Good-by now, sweet." Joe Richards leaned to peck at her cheek. She lifted her lips, but he drew back. "Don't forget," he said, and hurried out of the breakfast room.

Carol heard the side entrance slam as he left the house for the garage. She walked to the window, and watched her husband drive out to the oak-shaded front road. Then her hazel eyes dropped to the necklace heaped in her two hands, heavy and alive, and as cool as a flowing brook.

The pearls, she knew, would certainly impress the Harvisons, an elderly couple enriched by the Global War through Government contracts. What the Harvisons had been before the war, nobody in Greenwich had ever found out, but it was suspected that they were newly wealthy. The pair were too ornate, too eager to impress people. And here was Joe trying to impress the Harvisons, perhaps in the hope of gaining a bigger slice of Dan Harvison's insurance account.

It was a surprise to Carol that Joe would do such a thing—a borrowed piece of jewelry to draw bad money! She stared at the pearls —and caught her breath.

Caught in the necklace string, between each pearl, were tiny flecks of mud.

Gray mud!

Joe, Carol realized, must have obtained the valuable necklace during his nocturnal adventure—when he had slipped out of his twin bed next to hers, left the house, and returned quietly just before dawn.

She would never have known he had gone had she not noted the gray mud on the rug beside Joe's bed. She had traced the mud to his closet, and there had found his muddy shoes and still damp trousers. It had rained during the night.

And now, here were the pearls, and the mud.

Carol Richards went directly upstairs and placed the necklace in the wall safe in her dressing room. Then she went into the bedroom and opened the closet. Joe's shoes and suit were gone. Perhaps he had told Jane, their maid, to take the things and send them to the cleaners. Or perhaps Joe himself had taken them away.

A strange dread began to filter into Carol's heart. She didn't care to question Jane. She didn't know what to do. But she couldn't forget the matter.

It was just before noon when the front doorbell rang. Carol was in the kitchen giving instructions to Jane, who had finished the cleaning and was about to prepare a light lunch. Jane was small and blonde, and usually cheerful and self-possessed. But this morning she appeared jittery. Almost furtive.

"I'll answer, Jane," Carol told her.

Outside the glass of the front door, Carol Richards saw a lean, unshaven man of about thirty. He stood awkwardly, shifting from one foot to the other. His gray hat was new, pulled low on his forehead, and his chalk-stripe gray suit was new, but it looked as if he had slept in it.

CAROL opened the front door only slightly, expecting to be asked if she cared to have her trees trimmed or if she wanted to buy any brushes.

"Joe Richards at home, ma'am?" the stranger asked, grinning—not unattractively.

"He's at his office in New York," Mrs. Richards said coolly. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

The stranger's dark eye swept her from head to toe. He grinned again, as if something about her amused him secretly. Carol's eyes swept him in return—and she saw his shoes were muddy.

"It was Joe I wanted to see," he told her. "I walked all the way up from the village to see him."

The odor of whiskey came along with his breath. He acted as if he wanted to be invited in.

"Mr. Richards will be back after six o'clock," Carol said and shut the door firmly.

Drawing back into the front hall, she waited until she saw the stranger walk down to the road, not too steadily. Her home sheltered in trees and shrubs, was a good five miles from the village, with vacant lots on both sides of the house and across the main road. Except for Jane, Carol was alone. She had never been afraid before, but now fear took hold of her.

What in the name of heavens could that drunken man want with her husband? And the stranger's shoes—they had been muddy—caked with gray mud!

When Jane called her to the dining room for a cup of tomato soup and a sandwich, Carol tried to get a grip on her nerves. But she couldn't eat. She didn't want to alarm Jane, so she struggled with the soup, then took the sandwich upstairs to her dressing room to hide it.

The extension phone rang. Carol lifted the handset.

"Hello," she said hopefully.

"Let me speak to Joe Richards," said a gruff voice—a voice vaguely familiar.

"Mr. Richards is at his office in the city."

"Oh, he is, is he?" growled the voice. "How can he get to work after running around graveyards all night?"

"I beg your pardon," Carol said.

"Don't high-hat me, babe," snarled the voice. "Tell your little Joey that he better not try any funny stuff or he'll be going back to the graveyard—in a coffin."

There was a click at the end of the line.

For several moments, Carol Richards sat with the handset poised, her hazel eyes wide with terror, her lips half-parted. That man's voice. Had it been the stranger of not an hour before? But that man could not have found a telephone so quickly? Or did he have an automobile, and had he lied to her in the hope of gaining entrance to her home?

Carol swiftly dialed Long Distance. She gave the number of Joe's office in New York. Tense, she waited till the switchboard operator at American Insurance answered.

"Let me speak to Mr. Joseph Richards, quickly!" Carol said.

"Mr. Richards didn't come in yet today, Mrs. Richards. He phoned he was seeing a client."

Carol cradled the handset.

Joe never called on clients. He was a junior executive. He owned his father's share of the business. Clients came to Joe.

Carol's knees were weak as she got up from the phone table. She went to the wall safe, spun the dial, and opened the door. Drawing out the black velvet bag, she extracted the pearl necklace. Strangely enough, it was no longer a priceless piece of jewelry. It lay heaped in her two hands like a coiled reptile—flecked with gray between the pearls, and with glistening platinum eyes at the

clasp end.

Shuddering, Carol Richards returned the necklace to its black bag and thrust it into the safe.

The next two hours were unbearable.

They were broken only by the arrival of the groceries from town, which were delivered to Jane in the kitchen. Carol returned to the living room. She couldn't read. She sat in a big chair and went over in her mind all that people had told her about Joe, and all that Joe had told her about himself.

ONE conversation in particular reoccurred to Carol.

"The war was what Joe needed," Betty Conway had once told Carol on the veranda of the golf club. Betty was the wife of Dick Conway, who handled much of the law business of Joe's insurance company. Betty was a swell person, and no gossip.

"How do you mean that Joe needed the war, Betty?" Carol had asked.

"Those depression years were terrible on everybody, Carol, and many of the young men went off the deep end. There didn't seem to be any hope for them. Some of them drank too much. Others picked up with strange people. They fought with their parents about politics. I hope we never go through it again."

"But about Joe, Betty?"

"Well, Joe's mother died and then his father became ill and wanted Joe to take over his part of the business," Betty tried to explain. "But Joe wouldn't. He picked up with bums and got mixed up with radicals. It was all the spirit of the times. Joe really thought there was going to be a revolution. He got into some bad scrapes with girls. But he got his fill of adventure when he enlisted and went to war. He saw too much killing. You know, of course, that Joe was right in the thick of it."

"He said he loved me because I saw things so clearly, and because I was quiet and could take things as they came," Carol had told Betty Conway.

Now, Carol wondered if she did see things clearly. As she sat in the wing chair beside the front window, looking across the lawn and the shrubs toward the main road to town, she wished she knew more about Joe. What in the world was he doing with a priceless pearl necklace, which had been in a deserted graveyard? Who was the man who had called at their home, and who was the tough who had phoned?

The living room phone rang.

Carol snatched at the handset, hoping it was Joe.

It was Sally Toping, who lived on the outskirts of the village.

"Carol!" Sally Toping cried. "I was hoping you'd drop off for lunch if you went to town. I'm bored stiff. My hairdresser refuses to take me until Thursday. Could you drive over for an hour this afternoon?"

"I'm afraid not, Sally. I have dinner guests coming."

"Isn't it simply awful about the murder?"

"What murder?" Carol's heart caught in her throat.

"Why, the body that was found in the graveyard," Sally Toping said. "Haven't you seen the paper? It's perfectly dreadful. They don't know who he is."

"Who is who, Sally?"

"The man found shot to death in the graveyard, Carol. What's the matter with you? You sound as if you're tight. There were footprints all over, and they think a vault was robbed. It might get on the radio this afternoon. We haven't had a good murder in years!"

"Sally, I've got to run. I'll call you in the morning."

Carol Richards hung up. Then she was suddenly on her feet. She had to see somebody or she would become hysterical.

Hurrying through the hall, she went into the butler's pantry, and into the kitchen.

"Jane!" she cried.

There was no answer.

"Jane! Jane! Where are you?"

The back door opened, and pretty, blond Jane Cobb stepped into the kitchen. The girl's blue eyes were opened inquiringly.

"Mrs. Richards, is there something wrong?"

Carol was about to blurt her fears, but then realized she must not.

"No," she said lamely. "I—I just thought you might have run off and left me with the dinner."

"I wouldn't do that, Mrs. Richards." Jane smiled. There was a man hanging around the driveway, and I merely went out to ask him what he wanted."

"What was that, Jane? A man in the driveway?" Carol Richards grew as cold as ice.

"Out near the road, Mrs. Richards," Jane went to the vegetables on the table. "He had been standing there for almost an hour, as if he were expecting somebody to come here. So I went out and asked him who he was waiting for." Jane laughed to herself. "He

said he was waiting for a street car, and then he walked off. He smelled of whiskey."

Carol Richards didn't laugh.

"He said he was waiting for a street car?" she asked tensely. "Why, there aren't even busses on this road."

"It was a joke, Mrs. Richards. He must have wanted a hand-out. But he wasn't badly dressed for a tramp. He had on a chalk-stripe gray suit and—"

"Lock the door, Jane!"

"Mrs. Richards, is there something wrong? You look—"

Carol Richards turned and went through the hall to the library. There, she leaned over Joe's big desk. At its rear was a secret compartment where Joe kept his old Army .45 caliber colt. She slid back its panel.

The gun was gone!

IT WAS some time before Carol Richards could muster enough strength to mount the stairs to her dressing room. Fight as she would against it, she still could do nothing about the dreadful pounding of her heart and the tightness of her nerves. Over and over again she tried to tell herself that her mind had run wild and that there was nothing to fear.

Entering her dressing room from the hall, she locked the door. Then, as if compelled by her body and not her mind, she locked the door that led to her and Joe's bedroom. Finally, she dropped into a chair and buried her face in her hands.

After a while, she got up and went into her bathroom. She started the tub filling with hot water. Taking off her housedress, chemise and girdle, she stuffed them all in a closet and chose a heavy robe, which she took back into the bathroom and placed on a stool. Then she stepped into the steaming tub.

For a long hour she lay there, her eyes closed, but her ears tense for the slightest sound. Then, somewhat calmer, she stood up and dried herself.

The sound of the phone made her start violently. She waited, and the ringing was broken off. Jane would be answering downstairs. Jane did not come up to knock on the door. Evidently it was a call for Jane, or the wrong number, or just nothing at all.

Carol wrapped herself in her robe and went across the dressing room to the front window. Outside, there was sunlight and blue sky. But the world was as still as death. No car roared down the main road.

The clock said five.

I'll have time to do my hair and dress," Carol thought. "I do feel better. But I hope Joe comes soon."

Just before six, she slipped a yellow evening dress over her auburn head, and sprayed herself with scent. Unlocking the hall door, she went out of the dressing room, and past the hall door to her bedroom. The hall door was open and the room was empty.

Then she walked downstairs.

Jane was coming from the butler's pantry with a tray of cocktail bottles and glasses.

"Mrs. Richards, you look perfectly beautiful," the girl said. "I'll bring the ice for the cocktails when you ring twice."

"Thank you, Jane," Carol said, once more courageous. "I'm going to have a sherry now. Have you brought the bottle?"

"Yes, it's here on the tray. Mr. Richards phoned while you were in the bath. He said he would be late."

Carol's mouth dropped open.

"How late?"

"He said not to worry. He would get here for dinner. He said Mr. Harvison likes bourbon, and so does his wife, but you must insist."

"Where did Mr. Richards phone from, Jane?"

"I don't know, Mrs. Richards."

Carol went into the living room and sat down as Jane set the cocktail tray on a table, poured a glass of sherry, and placed it on a lamp table beside her mistress.

At six o'clock, Joe didn't come. Nor at six-thirty, nor at seven. Twice Carol turned on the radio for news reports, but there was nothing about a murder in the Greenwich Ridge cemetery.

The last hour before eight was the most difficult. Every time a car passed along the main road, Carol tensed, hoping that it would enter the driveway. But it was not until eight o'clock that a car turned up the gravel driveway to the Richards' house.

Carol went to the front door. It was the Conways, the other couple invited to dinner. Their coupe pulled up before the steps and Betty Conway got out, wearing a dark blue cape over her evening dress. Dan Conway, in a dinner jacket, and hatless, followed his pretty black-haired wife to the front door.

"Betty!" Carol cried with relief. "I'm so glad you came."

"Did you expect me to leave you in the lurch with the Harvisons?" Betty laughed. "I stick through thick and thin."

"Hi, Carol, my ravishing beauty!" Bill Conway greeted. Has Joe got a martini

ready for me? I'm thirsty enough to drink water."

"Joe's not here yet," Carol said, accompanying her guests to the living room. "You better mix your own martini, Bill."

ANOTHER car entered the driveway, horn tooting.

Carol turned and almost ran to the front door. It was not Joe Richards, however. It was the Harvison sedan, a great long black car with chromium, plush, flowers in vases, and a liveried chauffeur. The chauffeur sprang out, opened the door, and Mrs. Harvison descended in mink. Dan Harvison followed her in a dinner jacket with black tie tucked under the wings of his collar.

Dan Harvison said something to the chauffeur, and the man got into the car, and backed away.

Carol opened the door, forced a winning smile.

"So nice of you to come."

"Good evening, Carol, my dear," said Mrs. Harvison." "I hope we are not too early."

"Oh, no, the Conways are here and Joe will be here any minute."

"Isn't Joe here yet?" Harvison asked roughly.

"Not yet, Mr. Harvison." Carol closed the door behind them. "If you would like to leave your things in the den, Mrs. Harvison, I'll show you there while Mr. Harvison joins the Conways."

"No, Carol, your servant can take my mink," said Mrs. Harvison.

They went into the living room, and Bill Conway turned from the cocktail table.

"Hi, folks," Conway said. "What'll it be, cocktails or firewater?"

"Make mine rye," said Harvison. "How-de-do, Mrs. Conway. You and Mrs. Richards look swell."

"Bill, Mr. Harvison takes bourbon, and it's been such a long drive that I think Mrs. Harvison should have something stronger than sherry."

"Oh, no, dearie, I'll just take some wine," said Mrs. Harvison, dropping her mink coat onto a chair.

"Now, girlie, you know you like my drink," said Harvison. "Pour her some bourbon, Bill."

Carol picked up Mrs. Harvison's coat and handed it to Jane, who was putting ice on the cocktail table. Jane left the room.

"Wasn't that a dreadful murder, Carol?" Betty Conway said in a hushed voice. "Has Jane heard about it yet?"

Carol turned.

"You mean about the body in the cemetery?"

"Didn't you read about it in the last paper?" Betty asked quietly. "Oh, I see, Joe hasn't come from the village yet. It was a man by the name of Cobb. I thought it might be a relative of Jane's."

"Cobb!" Carol cried. "Not Jane's uncle!"

Dan Harvison swung to stare at Mrs. Richards.

"You mean that dead man is the uncle of that servant girl?" he demanded.

"It couldn't be, or Jane would have heard," Carol said.

There was the sound of a man's steps in the hall, and Joe Richards burst into the room.

"Hello, everybody!" he shouted excitedly. "I had a puncture and had to walk the last half mile. Glad you're all here. I'll be right down as soon as I change. Make yourselves merry."

"Joe!" Carol exclaimed. "I'm so glad, Joe. I must see you!"

"I'll be right down, my love," he called, disappearing toward the hall stairs.

Carol ran after him.

"Joe!"

"Take care of our guests, Carol, and don't forget what I told you this morning. Get them at the table. I'll miss my drink."

Carol gulped and went back into the living room. Bill Conway was passing drinks to the Harvisons, who were sitting on the divan, staring at Carol as if she had invited them to a wake, and they didn't like it. Betty Conway was smiling her best. Bill Conway tried to joke.

"Well, Joe must have got in a poker game at the office, and I'd say he won a few pots."

"He'll be right down," Carol said in a strained voice. "I'll take a martini, Bill."

"This isn't bad bourbon." Harvison had a go at his glass again.

"It's real good," said Mrs. Harvison flatly. "Where do you get it, Carol?"

"Joe gets it. I don't know where."

"Wonder how much he pays for it," said Harvison, running a finger under the tight collar about his thick neck.

"Would you people be so kind as to excuse me a moment?" Carol asked. "I want to speak to Joe."

"Go ahead," said Harvison.

Carol got up and went into the hall. She tried to hurry up the stairs, but her knees were shaking. In the upper hall, she saw that the bedroom door was closed, so she

went on into her dressing room. She crossed it and knocked at the connecting door to the bedroom.

"Joe!" she called.

There was no answer.

SHE tried the door, but it was locked. She reached for the key, remembering that she had locked it herself that afternoon. Now, the key was gone!

"Joe!" she cried.

Still, there was no answer.

Going into the hall, she tried the hall door to the bedroom. It, too, was locked. She hammered her fist on the door. Joe was probably in his shower and couldn't hear her, but why had he locked the doors?

Carol went back into her dressing room and stood in indecision. The light from the hall shone in upon the wall safe. She walked to the safe steadily, turned the dial of the combination and drew open the door. The first thing that met her eyes was Joe's .45 caliber Colt.

The weapon had not been there that afternoon. But there it was, now, resting on top of the black velvet bag. And, deeper in the safe, lay the pearl necklace—out of the velvet bag. Joe must have examined it before going for his shower. He knew the safe combination. But why had he put his gun here?

Carol drew the heavy weapon out and placed it on the table beneath the safe, her heart pounding in terror. This could be the weapon that had shot the Cobb man in the cemetery. There was a fine gray powder on the gun's butt, as if mud had been wiped off.

"And Joe wants me to wear the pearls," Carol said to herself dazedly.

Her hand reached for the necklace. And just then she heard someone move on the carpet of her dressing room, and a flashlight beam caught her in its blinding brilliance.

Her eyes flashed to a wall mirror. Reflected in the glass she saw Dan Harvison.

Harvison was standing well within the dressing room, away from the door, and in front of a window. His face was ugly, his eyes hard. He had a raised automatic pistol in one hand and a flashlight in the other.

"Just get away from the gun, babe," Harvison's rough voice spoke, and then Carol Richards realized that that was the tone of the man who had talked to her that afternoon over the phone.

Slowly Carol turned. She still held part of the pearl strings. Oddly enough, she did not cry out. The mystery of the afternoon was no longer a horrible, dreadful unseen something that turned her bones to jelly. This was real. This was a guest in her own home accosting her with a gun.

Carol slowly drew the neckace from the safe. She was amazed at the coolness of her own voice.

"Is it the pearls you want, Mr. Harvison?"

"Smart as a whip, eh?" Dan Harvison snarled, and clicked off his flashlight, leaving the hall light as the only illumination. "So you were wise to the little game your husband was playing? Going to make a sucker out of me, eh? Well, get away from that gun on the table. I'll take the pearls and get my meal elsewhere, babe."

Dan Harvison started toward her, his fat jowls quivering with anger.

"Society birds," he sneered. "That's the way you put it over. Make everything look just hotsie-totsie and then pull this lawyer on me, and most likely the joint is full of cops."

"Just a moment, Mr. Harvison," Carol said stiffly. "You know this is robbery, don't you?"

"Robbery!" Dan Harvison snapped. "What do you call going into a graveyard at night and cracking my vault? What do you think your husband was doing out there in the cemetery last night—playing pinochle with the stiffs? He swiped that pearl necklace on me, and I want it back. I never would

When Captain Tom Ready of the Treasury Department tangles with a resourceful international swindler, the law holds an amazing trump card in

THE LUCK CALCULATOR

By PAUL REGARD

A THRILL-PACKED NOVELET COMING NEXT ISSUE

have got wise to him if my spotters hadn't seen him going into the cop station this morning."

Carol braced herself.

"Where is Joe now, Mr. Harvison?" she asked.

Harvison reached out his hand for the necklace.

"Give, baby," he said. "Your little Joey is in the next room, listening to the birdies sing. My chauffeur slipped up the back way and waited for him. You don't have to worry, but you won't be coming downstairs for awhile, kid. Me an' the wife are blowing. Hand over the beads."

"Here," Carol said.

She swung the heavy necklace with a wild strength born of hate and fear—throwing it from her as if it were an ugly snake.

The pearls struck Dan Harvison in the eyes. His pistol went off as he staggered backward, the bullet smashing into the plaster of the ceiling.

Carol snatched up Joe's automatic pistol from the table, raced for the door, screaming for Bill Conway. She reached the hall before Dan Harvison fired again—and missed. She was fleeing down the hall when the door to her bedroom jerked open. A man in a chauffeur's uniform leaped into her path. She collided with him and they both fell.

"Bill!" Carol yelled. "They've killed Joe!"

She grasped at the chauffeur's hair and pulled with all her strength. The man tried to fight her off, as someone pounded up the stairs on the run. Carol heard Harvison coming out of her dressing room, shouting his rage. And then there was the crash of guns. A man howled strickenly.

The chauffeur was trying to hurl her away from him, but suddenly he went stiff as a post, and somebody dragged him off her.

"It's all right, now, baby," a familiar voice spoke to her. "No, don't fight me. I'm a friend of Joe's."

She smelled whiskey, and she knew the voice was that of the man who had called that afternoon and who had loitered around their driveway.

"Bill!" Carol cried.

"It's all right," Bill Conway said, and she found him helping her up. "Pat shot Harvison and knocked out the chauffeur. Jane has Mrs. Harvison covered with a gun downstairs."

Carol swayed into Bill Conway's arms.

"Where's Joe?" she asked weakly.

"We'll get him," said Conway. "Pat," he ordered, "go bring out that Commando pard of yours. I'll bet he's sore he missed the party."

Bill Conway helped Carol into her bedroom, where Joe Richards lay bound and gagged on the bed. The unshaven stranger in the chalk-stripe suit was releasing him. Joe sat up, a sheepish grin on his lips.

"I heard the shooting," he said. "Who got hit?"

"Joe!" Carol cried, and she threw herself weeping into his arms.

IT WAS not until the unshaven stranger in the chalk-stripe suit drove off with the Harvison woman handcuffed to her chauffeur, and Dan Harvison lying in the back seat with a bullet hole in him, that Joe Richards mixed a good martini and explained things. He insisted that Jane come in and have a drink with them.

"Pat is Jane's uncle, my pet," Joe Richards explained to his wife. "He's not the man murdered in the graveyard last night. That man was one of Harvison's bunch. When we started to open the new vault that Harvison bought for himself to stow his loot in, we ran into trouble, and Pat Cobb did some shooting. We didn't want the local cops to know too much, so we put Pat's letters and things on the body. We wanted to keep it from Harvison."

"Joe, I don't understand what you're talking about," Betty Conway broke in. "Who is this Pat, and what is this all about? You and Bill look like cats that swallowed canaries."

"Pat Cobb was a Commando with Joe," Bill Conway started to explain. "But he's FBI now. That's how Jane came to work here. It was on Pat's recommendation, when he learned Joe would need a servant after getting married. It was Joe who tipped Pat Cobb off to Harvison. Joe got suspicious of Harvison in examining Harvison's insurance accounts. It seems the man ducked out of a lot of income tax during the war."

"But the necklace, Joe?" Carol asked.

"Harvison put his money into jewels smuggled out of Europe during the war," Joe Richards replied with a grin, and he tossed off his cocktail as if it were water. "He bought that cemetery vault to stow them in. Pat and I figured it all out. We just had to get into that vault for a look-see. And we did, and it was great fun—if we hadn't had the shooting."

"Great fun!" Carol exclaimed. "You almost were the death of me, Joe. You don't know what I went through."

"We didn't plan it that way, sweetheart," Joe Richards hastened to apologize. "I just wanted to spring the necklace on Harvison at dinner and see his reaction. Pat was going to walk in and arrest him if he exploded. Bill Conway was here to make the thing legal. We didn't want Harvison to say somebody had planted the jewels in the vault to get him arrested. We wanted him to talk, to try to come to terms with us. The dining room is wired with microphones."

"And it was Pat Cobb who called this afternoon," Carol said accusingly. "He scared the daylights out of me."

"Pat had been up all night, and he had to take a drink to keep his eyes open," Richards explained. "He came out here when I didn't get in touch with him in the morning. I didn't get in touch with him because the cops locked me up when I went to tell them about the body. They wouldn't let me go until they found Pat, and Pat was hanging around here all day. We figure that Harvison learned about the murder through the paper, then put his chauffeur to watch the cops. That's how Harvison and his chauffeur got wise to us. That chauffeur is an escaped con."

"Joe, you talk like a gangster," Carol said.

"Boy, you fight like a gun moll," Bill Conway said. "When do we eat? I'm starved."

"I'll never forgive you, Joe," said Carol.

"If I promise never to do it again?" Joe Richards asked. "You see, darling, I didn't want to tell you because I knew you wouldn't let me. You're so level-headed, so safe and secure, such a quiet and respectable person. So different from me."

"And about twice as smart and twice as tough in a fight, if you ask me," Conway put in. "Kiss and make up, you two. I'm hungry, and so is Betty."

"Bill, we're going to the village for dinner," said Betty Conway. "Don't you know enough to let these two lovebirds alone for the evening? They're going to have a second honeymoon."

"Take the bourbon with you, Bill," Richards shouted as the Conways went out the living room door. "And take Jane down to meet Pat. He owes her a party."

"We'll take Pat and Jane on our party," Betty Conway replied.

"Then, I'll be darned if we all don't go," said Carol Richards. "To the devil with eating alone, Joe. You don't deserve even a first honeymoon. Let me go, Joe! Stop. You're smearing my make-up."

"We're not going anywhere," said Joe Richards. And they didn't.

Van Bronck disregarded both the flames and his wounded shoulder

A Jan Pieter Van Bronck Novelet

WAR AT WILLOWMORE

By CHARLES S. STRONG

CHAPTER I

Murder Tank

JAN PIETER VAN BRONCK was a long way from his beloved Karoo as he turned his cart bullocks in at the great Army Base at Willowmore.

Ordinarily the appearance of a civilian at this South African training base would have aroused the interest of the sentry at the base's gate, but as Van Bronck approached, the soldier merely presented arms.

"How goes it, Jan Pieter?" he called out.

"Dry on the Karoo, but the corn is ripening," Jan Pieter replied.

An officer stepped out of the guard house at that moment and came toward the famous farmer-detective. Jan Pieter Van Bronck drew heavily on his long curving meerschaum pipe, adjusted his flat-crowned hat, and lowered his ample-waisted figure over the front wheel of the cart to the ground.

"What brings you to Willowmore?" inquired Captain Raymond of the South African Fusiliers.

Jan Pieter motioned toward the tarpaulin-covered load on his voortrekker wagon.

"Many of the boys from the Vaal are here in camp," he said. "You know how they like to eat. I've brought them a cartload of fresh vegetables."

"They'll like that," Captain Raymond agreed. "You've been tops with the fellows ever since you did that job up north for the air force. They'd do anything for you."

Death strikes mysteriously at the army tank crews of a great South African training base—and the Boer sleuth strikes back!

"Not anything," Jan Pieter declared with a short laugh. "I've been trying to join this man's army for five years, but they keep telling me I'm too old. Maybe a man who has lived long enough to remember Cecil Rhodes and Oom Paul Kruger and Jameson's Raid is on the elderly side, but I'll bet I can dance to the 'Stellenbosch Boys' as well as anyone."

"But war isn't like it used to be," Captain Raymond pointed out. "You'll find that out in the next ten minutes. We're training a lot of American and Empire troops here who are going to take part in the fighting in China. The weather is much better for this training here than it is in India. You're right on time to watch a try-out of some new tanks that have just arrived from the States. You'll see then why this war is for young men."

A man from the Quartermaster's Corps took charge of Van Bronck's wagon and supplies, and Captain Raymond led the Dutchman along the company street. Barracks on either side were big enough to quarter thousands of men.

Willowmore was strategically located, Van Bronck knew, so that this great training station might not only draw men from the American and British convoys arriving at Capetown, but also maintain rail communications with Mossel Bay, Port Elizabeth and Port Alfred for the shipment of trained men across the Indian Ocean to the China-Burma-India fronts.

Jan Pieter Van Bronck was impressed with the great amount of modern equipment at the base.

"This is certainly something to stir the hearts of any South African," he declared.

OUT on the training ground, which extended many miles northward toward Beaufort West and Graaf Reinet, hundreds of medium tanks were lined up. Operating crews and mechanical units were swarming over them like busy ants. At first glance, the whole scene suggested disorder. But no sooner had the bugler sounded a call, than the mechanics hurried away, the crews climbed into the tanks, and each of the groups presented a trim, military appearance.

"Quite an improvement on the cavalry," Van Bronck commented.

Captain Raymond nodded. Another officer approached and joined them and Captain Raymond turned to Jan Pieter.

"I want you to meet Major De Witt of the United States Army," he said. "The Major came over here with the last shipment of tanks, and he's going to help us get the bugs out of them. Major, this is Mynheer Van Bronck, one of the big farmers from up in the Orange River District."

Jan Pieter Van Bronck

"Glad to know you," greeted the American. "I guess this tank display is proving rather fascinating to you?"

The Dutchman nodded. The bugle call sounded again at that moment. The hundreds of tanks on the field whipped into gear, the tracks tightened up with a clatter, and then the armored force moved off.

Raymond invited Jan Pieter and the Major to join him in a command car, and they drove off to follow the maneuvers.

The flat area of the plain gave way to rugged terrain, and then to a stretch of rolling hills. These, Jan Pieter knew, would provide a complete test for the new mobile equipment.

Jan Pieter Van Bronck watched the forward echelon of tanks with a pair of powerful field glasses. Suddenly he caught his breath. "Something is wrong!" he said.

The command car speeded up. Strained lines marked the faces of the army officers. One of the leading tanks, moving along at about forty miles an hour, its thirty-ton weight balanced on its tracks, had suddenly hit a part of the corduroyed area, and swerved aside.

Now it crashed into the tank next to it!

The sound of the impact echoed through the afternoon. The two armored behemoths reared up on their backs and the second tank turned over on its side. The driver of a machine in the oncoming line swung out to avoid a collision, but was only partially successful.

Two-way radio sets began to crackle, the bugle sounded, and Captain Raymond tooled his jeep toward the pile-up, shouting commands at the top of his lungs.

"What do you make of it?" Major De Witt asked Jan Pieter hurriedly.

De Witt was biting his lip, and Jan Pieter understood why the American was so concerned. If this accident had been caused by any mechanical weakness in the American-made tanks, it would certainly cause unpleasant publicity about the United States in the Union of South Africa. If there had been sabotage anywhere along the line between America and South Africa, something certainly would have to be done about it before it cost human lives.

"Probably just a case where the fellow at the controls wasn't experienced enough," Jan Pieter declared, hoping his interpretation was correct.

The official car pulled up. A number of the tank crews were now out of their turrets, and already several officers in charge of the echelons were inspecting the wrecked vehicles. Captain Raymond pushed his way forward to the side of the tank that had first gone berserk.

"What's wrong?" he asked the tank's crew.

One of the crewmen pushed back his crash helmet and saluted gravely.

"It's Private Hargreaves, sir," he said. "He's dead!"

"Dead?" Captain Raymond's surprise was echoed by Jan Pieter and the American Major.

The soldier crewmen climbed out of the tank, and Captain Raymond swung in beside the slumped figure of Private Hargreaves, hunched over the tank controls. Hargreaves' hands still rested on the two levers that controlled the tracks, and his foot was on the throttle button.

CAPTAIN RAYMOND observed those facts and then, with the aid of Jan Pieter Van Bronck, he lifted the body out of the tank. They laid the soldier on the grass beside the wreckage, and a medical officer hastened up.

"Check on this man, Doctor Preston," Captain Raymond ordered.

The doctor, wearing the insignia of a lieutenant, knelt beside the man. His examination was thorough.

"He's dead all right," he said when, finally, he stood up. "But I can't understand what killed him. There's no indication that he cracked his head against the tank, or anything else like that. It might have been just a weak heart. We'll have to look into it further."

One of the huge repair trucks, with a flat trailer for gathering up the wreckage of the tanks, was already maneuvering into place, and when the ambulance moved off with the body of Private Hargreaves, the mechanics attended to the damaged war machines.

"Not a very good start for your demonstration, Major De Witt," Jan Pieter observed.

"No, it isn't," Major De Witt sighed unhappily. "But accidents will happen. We'll simply have to work that much harder now to avoid them."

Because of the Hargreaves incident, the maneuvers were shortened, and as tea-time drew near, the officers gathered on the veranda of the bungalow assigned to Captain Raymond and Major De Witt.

"Have you heard anything new on the accident?" Jan Pieter asked the captain.

"Doctor Preston will be over a bit later," Raymond replied. "I believe he's performing an autopsy. In the meantime, I've been talking to the two other members of the tank crew. One is a fellow named Kurt Von Burdeau who comes from up in the Transvaal, around your neighborhood."

"Kurt Von Burdeau?" Major De Witt interrupted. "Are you sure he's Dutch? That sounds like a typical German name."

"He may be of German parentage," agreed Captain Raymond. "The other tank crewman is a fellow named George Baylor. Baylor swears that everything was all right until the moment Hargreaves dropped over the controls. Hargreaves must have fallen on

the lever controlling the right-hand track. That made the tank swerve, and caused the collision."

"Unfortunate." Jan Pieter removed his beloved meerschaum from his lips, and held its polished, fumed bowl in his chubby hand. He brushed the lapel of his Norfolk jacket with his other hand, and turned to Major De Witt.

"And how do you like our South Africa, Major?" he asked, musingly.

"Now that I'm here," laughed De Witt, "I think it's swell. But I had the devil's own time getting here, you know."

"You see," Captain Raymond broke in, "the ship Major De Witt started out on was torpedoed, and he was adrift in a lifeboat for eight or ten hours before one of the other ships in the convoy was able to pick him up."

Jan Pieter studied the American officer with new interest.

"That's one war-time experience I wouldn't like to have," he said.

"It is rather frightening," De Witt admitted, "drifting around in the pitch dark, wondering whether the rest of the convoy will go on, whether a destroyer will find you in the darkness, or just what will happen."

Dr. Preston's arrival interrupted any further discussion of Major De Witt's experience. Preston accepted a cup of tea from Captain Raymond almost mechanically, and then sat down between Raymond and Van Bronck.

"I have some real news," he announced. "Private Hargreaves was poisoned!"

"Poisoned?" The three other men in the group chorused the word.

CHAPTER II

To the Morgue

DOCTOR PRESTON nodded.

"There's no doubt of it," he declared emphatically. "I performed the autopsy, and the evidence was there. I went over the body and tried to find the point where the poison might have been injected, but I could find no trace. It may have been the poison was eaten. I'll have to go back and check the corpse again after dinner."

"Did this fellow Hargreaves have any enemies?" asked Jan Pieter, who was more familiar with investigations of this kind than the others here.

"None that I know of," Captain Raymond replied. "He seemed to get along well with the other men in his detachment." Raymond turned to Doctor Preston. "Say nothing about this to anyone else. I'll have to make a report to the colonel, of course. But there's no sense in our alarming the other men in our group. Jan Pieter, my boy, maybe you have a little job here!"

The corpulent Dutchman stoked his pipe, his round face, thoughtful.

"It's disagreeable," he said. "But if I can do anything to clear up matters, I'll be glad to help."

Captain Raymond assigned the Boer farmer to quarters, and about twenty minutes later Jan Pieter excused himself to clean up for dinner.

But Jan Pieter Van Bronck didn't stay in his quarters long. He spent the time until evening mess familiarizing himself with the great army encampment. This little job of murder-detecting here looked more difficult than some of the other cases he had tackled. He was now quite a distance away from his usual haunts, and he did not have the help of his native Kaffir and Basuto assistants. But his pioneer sagacity was enough in itself to give him an advantage over most other men. His first task was the examination of the body of Private Hargreaves. He might have asked Doctor Preston to take him into the examination room, but a precise sense of caution made him avoid that as unwise.

Van Bronck found the hospital building without difficulty. He knew the location of the room in which Preston had performed his autopsy. It was in a shed, which was attached to the main hospital building by a low covered passage. The outbuilding served as a temporary morgue.

Jan Pieter's own research in criminology had armed him with an experience in autopsy work that had helped him frequently in cases of this kind. The soldier on duty a short distance from the hospital outbuilding had seen Jan Pieter with both the doctor and the captain, so he made no objection when Van Bronck boldly entered the building.

The body of Private Hargreaves, a cloth covering it, was resting on a metal table, and large glass jars on the shelves above held the results of Doctor Preston's autopsy. Jan Pieter Van Bronck crossed to the table, and was about to lift the sheet from the corpse when he heard a light step behind him.

"I wouldn't go near that if I were you!" a harsh voice said.

The chubby Boer straightened slowly. His hands instinctively brushed against the skirt of his Norfolk jacket where he carried a snub-nosed pistol. But something in the tone of the voice behind him prompted him to hesitate. He swung around carefully.

"Keep your hand at your side, mynheer!" came the next command.

Van Bronck faced the speaker. That man, standing with his back to the closed door, was dressed in the white operating robe of a surgeon, and a surgical mask concealed all

but his eyes. He was leveling a Luger pistol at the Dutch detective.

Jan Pieter was too clever to argue with a loaded gun in the hand of a determined man. But he had talked and sweated his way out of tight spots before.

"Surely, doctor," he said, "you do not object to my watching the autopsy. Captain Raymond will give you my bona fides. It must be a fascinating study, the human body!"

"You are not interested in studies of the human body," the white-garbed figure declared. "You are interested in one particular body—that of Private Walter Hargreaves!"

"And why not?" Jan Pieter fenced. "Perhaps it is a morbid interest. Some people like to look at cadavers."

"So I've heard, Herr Van Bronck! Murder is your specialty. But this isn't any murder."

"A man does not die of poisoning inside an armored tank through accident," Jan Pieter pointed out.

AS THE Dutchman spoke, he was backing slowly toward the shelf that contained the autopsy jars. The white-robed man's grip on the Luger stiffened.

"That is far enough, Herr Van Bronck," the ghostly form said. "I am going to kill you. You have spoiled the plans of some of the workers for Der Fuehrer who now are assisting the Mikado. You will pay the price."

Jan Pieter Van Bronck's size was deceptive, and the speed with which his rotund body could move, when in danger, had surprised many men in the past. Now, he was closer to the jars on the shelves than his adversary suspected.

With a cat-like leap he whirled, grasped one of the liquid-filled jars. He flung it at the armed-man's masked face.

The Luger in the man's hand exploded. The bullet plowed across the top of Jan Pieter's shoulder. But the Dutchman was whirling across the room like a dervish, following the flung jar.

The liquid-filled jar hit the white-garbed man a glancing blow. His gun came up for a second shot, and went off just as the chubby Boer voortrekker smashed into his knees. The two men went down in a tangle of arms and legs.

A heavy pounding sounded on the locked door of the emergency morgue. The white-clad man flung himself clear of Jan Pieter, and his gun came up again, this time aimed at the light overhead. The Luger exploded, and the room was plunged into darkness.

The flailing arms of the Dutchman found and closed about the legs of the gunman. The two men locked in a firm grip, as rifle butts now pounded against the morgue's heavy wooden door. Jan Pieter tried to pin down the writhing figure, but as he moved, his wounded shoulder struck one corner of the morgue table and pain stabbed through him. His hands relaxed their grip involuntarily.

Momentarily off balance, Jan Pieter sensed rather than saw the bogus doctor bring up his Luger and smash it down on his head. The wave of anguish that engulfed Jan Pieter paralyzed his hands, and his fingers slipped from the starched white uniform.

Long nails scraped a track across the face of the German agent, and then a second blow from the Luger flattened Van Bronck to the floor. His face was cut by broken glass, and a red haze crossed his eyes as he blacked out.

Minutes later, Jan Pieter Van Bronck blinked open his eyes and looked up into the grim face of a sergeant of the South African Armored Divisions. In the background was the face of Captain Raymond. The commander of the South African Fusiliers was also sober of mien as he looked down at the bedraggled Boer investigator.

Jan Pieter struggled to his feet. His hand went to his belt where he usually carried his treasured meerschaum. The stem had been broken off, and the pipe had been kicked into a corner of the emergency morgue.

"It certainly looks as though you did a fine job," Captain Raymond declared.

"I don't understand what you mean." A puzzled expression was on Jan Pieter's face.

"What were you doing here?" Captain Raymond asked.

"I came over to examine the body of this soldier, Hargreaves," Jan Pieter declared. "When I went up to the table, somebody sneaked up behind me and jumped me."

Captain Raymond raised a skeptical eyebrow.

"The guard says you were the only one who came in here who didn't belong here."

Jan Pieter pursed his lips. He sensed that the killer had cleverly outwitted him.

"Who was the guard?" Jan Pieter asked.

"Private Kurt Von Burdeau!" Captain Raymond said, his gesture indicating that soldier.

Jan Pieter shook his head slowly. He was trying to put his finger on something in the faces of the men about him. His eyes roamed from Von Burdeau, still holding his bayonetted rifle, to Captain Raymond, Doctor Preston and Major De Witt. But at the moment the Boer detective could not spot any clue.

He looked about the room at the wreckage the fight had caused. Several hospital orderlies were sweeping up the broken glass. Under the direction of Doctor Preston, another was wheeling the body of Private Hargreaves out of the room and into the main hospital building adjoining.

JAN PIETER'S thoughts were interrupted by a clattering of metal, and a popping of motor exhausts. Private Von Burdeau sa-

luted, dropped his rifle under his arm and withdrew.

"What's going on now?" Jan Pieter asked.

"Night maneuvers," Captain Raymond explained soberly. "The death of Private Hargreaves sort of slowed things up, but the war must go on, even at Willowmore. A squadron of planes is already in the air, and will drop flares on the field. Our tanks will go through their tests on the proving grounds."

"And Privates Von Burdeau and Baylor?"

"They will be assigned to a new tank, and will continue their training. After all, in the tank corps as in the air corps, there is one thing to remember. A soldier must not lose his confidence. If he crashes in a tank, we put him right back in another one so he'll forget about his fears."

Jan Pieter pondered as one of the orderlies bandaged his bullet wound, and patched the cuts that had been inflicted on his face by the broken glass. Then he joined Captain Raymond, Lieutenant Preston and Major De Witt. As he left the building with them and headed toward the proving grounds, Jan Pieter got the ear of Captain Raymond.

"Where's your communications center?" he asked. "I'd like to check up on several of the men here who might have been connected with the death of Private Hargreaves. After this fuss in the morgue, it'll be impossible to keep things quiet, and the quicker we get the murder cleared up, the better it'll be."

"You're right," agreed Captain Raymond, and he gave Jan Pieter the necessary directions.

At the communications center, Jan Pieter Van Bronck sent several messages to Capetown and then joined the reviewing party. After being bumped along in one of the jeeps for about ten minutes, he began to long for his bullock cart, and the aloes of his favorite Karoo. But he had a job to do, and Jan Pieter Van Bronck was not one to forget that.

"How did you make out with your messages?" Captain Raymond inquired.

"All sent out," replied Jan Pieter. "I ought to have my answers by morning. How are the maneuvers going?"

"First rate—so far." Captain Raymond smiled tightly. "The men and machines have come through with flying colors on the field maneuvers. Now we're going in for the cross-country part of the operation. We'll have to watch these closely. They're similar to the operations where Private Hargreaves came to grief."

Jan Pieter Van Bronck took a pair of night glasses that were offered to him, and adjusted them to his eyes. He watched the moving column of tanks and then turned to Captain Raymond.

"Head for the front of the column," he said. "I'd like to watch this from the other end."

"It's liable to be confusing up there," Raymond warned, "with all the official cars darting around."

"It may be a matter of life and death," Jan Pieter declared soberly.

Major De Witt laughed.

"You sound positively macabre, Herr Van Bronck. You don't expect another poisoning, do you?"

"It's impossible to tell," Van Bronck replied. "But if one is going to occur, I'd like to be right there when it happens. Maybe this time we'll be able to catch the killer before he can destroy the evidence."

"Top hole," remarked De Witt. "I hadn't thought of that. Trust you Boers to get to the bottom of a thing. Speed up, Captain Raymond. It must be fascinating to watch one of these armored advances from the front."

Their conversation was interrupted, as a siren howled. Most of the tanks clattered to a halt, but two of the steel monsters ran wild at the front of the column. One of them swung broadside—and crashed into the other! There was the shriek of tortured metal, then an explosion as a gas tank blew up!

CHAPTER III

Guilt Test

JAN PIETER'S suggestion to Captain Raymond had placed the official car almost alongside the wrecked tanks. The chubby Dutchman leaped out of the jeep and ran toward the burning vehicle. As the flames roared up, a searchlight truck turned its beam on the scene.

Van Bronck disregarded both the flames and his wounded shoulder. Coming in from the windward side, so that the flames and smoke would be blown away from him, he made it to the tank and got the turret of the tank open.

The drawn face of Kurt Von Burdeau was the first thing he saw. Then he saw the body of George Baylor slumped over the controls of the burning tank.

"Help me with Baylor," Jan Pieter called to Von Burdeau. "He's out cold."

The third member of the crew, a former Cape farmer, was also straining to get the inert body of George Baylor free. There was a hiss of steam as an emergency truck pulled up and poured water and chemicals on the burning wreck. Baylor was carried from the tank.

When the members of the tank crew were some distance away from the wrecked ve-

hicle, they put Baylor down and Van Bronck bent over his body.

Captain Raymond and Major De Witt came up.

"What happened?" Jan Pieter Van Bronck asked the crewmen finally.

"The same thing as before," Kurt Von Burdeau stammered. "George was driving along, just the way Hargreaves was, when suddenly he flopped over the controls, and the tank swerved. I thought we were all going to be burned to death. The heat in there was stifling."

Captain Raymond looked at Jan Pieter.

"He's not—?"

"Yes, he's dead," declared Van Bronck. "And I'll stake my reputation on it that he was poisoned, just like Hargreaves was."

"Impossible," broke in Major De Witt.

"Impossible or not," Captain Raymond declared, "there's only one conclusion to be drawn. Private Von Burdeau, you're under arrest. Sergeant, take him to the guard-house and see that he's kept under closest surveillance. We don't want him committing suicide before this is cleared up."

Von Burdeau looked at the captain as though he could not believe his ears.

"Do you accuse me of murdering Baylor and Hargreaves, Captain?" he asked.

"What would you think under the circumstances?" Captain Raymond retorted. "This afternoon and evening two men have died under identical circumstances. Of the first group of three, two are victims, and you are the only survivor. It would have been physically impossible for anyone else to have committed both the crimes!"

Jan Pieter Van Bronck studied Von Burdeau, as a burly MP sergeant held the soldier by one arm.

"Not impossible, Captain," Jan Pieter corrected the accusation. "Just unlikely. Baylor might have killed Hargreaves on orders from somebody higher up. Then when the plan to make the death look like an accident failed and the poisoning was discovered, Baylor might have become panic-stricken. Our master mind, fearing that Baylor would reveal his identity, had to seal Baylor's lips, and he might have hired a new man to do the job."

"There is something in what Herr Van Bronck says," Major De Witt agreed. "You might hold Private Von Burdeau for a court martial, but otherwise I would not jump to conclusions too quickly."

Captain Raymond was more than willing to accept the Major's suggestion. The matter was too complicated for him, and he did not want to get any deeper into it. If a court martial took charge, all further decisions would be up to the colonel of the regiment or the provost marshal.

Private Von Burdeau was taken to the guard-house, and the night maneuvers were cancelled. Jan Pieter Van Bronck went, then, to his bullock cart and his voortrekker bedding roll. Somehow, he felt more comfortable there than on an army cot. But the murder puzzle he was trying to solve would not permit him to sleep. Propped against the tail-board of the wagon, he gazed up at the Southern Cross and pondered the scanty clues in the case. The creaking of boot leather close to the wagon pulled him out of his thoughts.

Jan Pieter had discarded his Norfolk jacket, and was holding his gun-belt in his lap. Now, he slipped the snub-nosed pistol into his hand, and straightened. A familiar figure was only a few paces from him.

"You're out quite late, Major De Witt," Jan Pieter said. "It's way after taps."

"Quite so," agreed the Major. "But I felt I just had to see you."

"About what?" Jan Pieter Van Bronck asked.

Jan Pieter had located a new stem for his meerschaum, and now he busied himself with stuffing the pipe's bowl. This casual bit of business, he had found, was effective in throwing whomever he was talking to off guard. It had served him well in the past.

"I can't help noticing, Herr Van Bronck," the Major said, "that these fellows here set great store by you in solving these murder cases. I've just come from Doctor Preston. He tells me that George Baylor died of the same kind of poison that killed poor Hargreaves."

"Interesting." Jan Pieter's eyes were on the bowl of the pipe. "But what does that suggest to you?"

"I'm wondering if I can't be of help to you in solving this beastly thing? It's my idea that Captain Raymond may know more about it than appears on the surface."

"Captain Raymond?"

"You don't happen to know what he did before the war, do you?" Major De Witt said.

"Of course I do," the Boer detective replied. "Everyone in South Africa knows that. He was, and still is, the owner of one of the largest motor car plants in the Union. Rather thought he was going to get a big tank contract from the government. That's how he happens to have such a responsible part in this training program here at Willowmore."

MAJOR DE WITT nodded slowly.

"Have you ever been in the army, Herr Van Bronck?" he asked suddenly.

"Yes, of course," Jan Pieter replied. "I went through the Boer War on the side of the Boers, and through the World War in the Army of the Union and the Empire!"

"Then you know that soldiers are extremely superstitious. If they get the idea that these American tanks I've brought over

are jinxed, what do you think is the first thing they'll do?"

"They'll refuse to fight in them!" Jan Pieter declared.

"Right," agreed De Witt. "But the South African Army can't do without tanks, with modern warfare what it is. And if they can't get American tanks, they'll turn to South African tanks, and our friend Raymond will be sitting pretty."

Jan Pieter whistled. He looked up at the blinking stars above him, at the sickle of a moon, and the haze of nimbus crossing the moon.

"You've given me a real angle," he said. "I'll get to work on it first thing in the morning."

"I'll be counting on you." Major De Witt's face was serious. "We Americans want to do our part, and we feel we can really supply the machines that will ultimately chase the Japanese out of Burma and China and settle all this Greater East Asia business. You'll be helping a great cause if you straighten this out, Herr Van Bronck."

"I'll do my best," Jan Pieter promised. "I'll see you in the morning."

Jan Pieter mused for another hour, after Major De Witt had gone, then he dozed off to sleep.

The Dutch detective was up early in the morning. His first step was to go to the Communications Shack. All about him was visible evidence that Willowmore was training thousands of men for the final phase of a great World War. On the parade grounds there was already the sound of moving vehicles. Great clouds of dust rose to the blue sky.

As he headed for the Officers' Mess with several messages in his hand, the Boer met Captain Raymond.

"Any news?" Raymond asked Jan Pieter soberly.

Jan Pieter nodded his head, and there was a gleam in the rotund little farmer's eyes as he looked at this officer of the South African Fusiliers.

"What is it?" Raymond demanded. "Do you know the identity of the killer?"

"I have four suspects." Van Bronck fingered the four sheets of paper he held. "And here I have a report on each one of them."

"Four suspects?" If Captain Raymond was putting on an act, he was a good actor. "Who are they?"

"One is Major De Witt. Another is Kurt von Burdeau. Another is Doctor Preston, and the fourth is yourself!"

"Me?" The captain's eyes flew wide.

"You have a lot to gain if the South African General Staff and the British in India decide not to use American tanks," Jan Pieter Van Bronck pointed out. "They would have no choice but to turn to your Raymond Motor Company for armor. But I'm going to try an experiment. If you are innocent, it will be proved very easily."

"What is the experiment?" Captain Raymond asked.

"I've discovered the way in which the two murders were committed!" Van Bronck said simply. "I'm now able, if I wish, to kill any man at this training camp by exactly the same method the original murderer used. I'm planning to turn this thing against the murderer. But he, alone, will know he is in danger. I plan to put him in a position so that he'll take steps against being killed, and thereby reveal himself."

Captain Raymond studied the Dutch voortrekker carefully.

"Of course I want to prove my innocence," he said. "I'll be glad to help in any way I can."

"Well, you can do this," replied Van Bronck. "I want you to get one of the big United States Army tanks—a five man job. Bring it around to Regimental Headquarters. I'm taking the colonel into my confidence. At headquarters, you and I will meet Doctor Preston and Major De Witt. Private Von Burdeau will have to be released from the guard house. The five of us, together, will try out this new tank. I'm sure the killer will be uncovered before we come back."

CHAPTER IV

Trial by Trickery

THE arrangements were completed, and it was a puzzled group that finally gathered around the newly-painted, dully-glowing tank. Many of the South Africans and native troops, who knew little or nothing about the drama about to be played within the walls of the metal monster, watched.

Jan Pieter Van Bronck climbed into the tank first. He checked over all of the equipment from the crash helmets hanging neatly over each tank-man's position to the controls and fuel tanks.

"All aboard," he finally announced.

"What is all this foolishness?" Major De Witt demanded.

Jan Pieter Van Bronck soothed him with an explanation that satisfied him as it did the others. Then he handed each man his crash helmet and his pistol and belt.

When the four men had taken their places, Jan Pieter pushed his flat-topped hat down over his head, and climbed into the command turret. Looking down between his legs, he could see the back of Major De Witt, who sat at the controls. Beside De Witt, on the front end of the tank, was Captain Raymond.

Doctor Preston and Kurt Von Burdeau manned the turret guns on either side of the Dutch detective.

"I've discovered the way in which Privates Hargreaves and Baylor were killed," Van Bronck said calmly, when they were under way. "I know how the poison was injected. I've arranged things so that the killer will receive a dose of his own poison. The rest of you are along as witnesses, in case the man is willing to make a confession before he is dead by his own hand."

The two officers turned in their seats at this startling announcement, but because of the construction of the tank, Van Bronck could not see their faces. Then Major De Witt turned back to his driving. He tooled the tank out onto the proving grounds. Other vehicles were already being put through their paces.

Tanks were wheeling about in twos, fours, in sections and echelons. As De Witt moved their tank along, Jan Pieter waited for one of his companions to speak. It was Captain Raymond who broke the silence.

"What happens now?" he asked.

The tension inside the tank had built up. Each man, Jan Pieter knew, felt it as though a heavy weight were bearing down upon him. The murderer himself was wondering how much the Dutch voortrekker knew about his death plot. The three innocent men would be worrying that something might go wrong and that the killer might turn his wrath against them. Two men had already died in the metal confines of these tanks.

"We'll see what happens," Jan Pieter answered Captain Raymond soberly. "The road is rough ahead. I think we ought to put on our crash helmets!"

As he spoke, Jan Pieter Van Bronck's hand went under the corner of his Norfolk jacket, and clasped his gun. He held it on his lap, watching the reactions of the men below.

Doctor Preston, Captain Raymond and Private Von Burdeau adjusted their helmets at once. They pulled them down tight over their foreheads and adjusted the straps. Major De Witt was busy with the controls of the tank. Finally, when they were on a straight, open stretch of the proving grounds, he drew a knitted woolen beanie from his tunic pocket, adjusted it on his head and placed the crash helmet over it. He let the straps dangle down along his jaw, and then his hands went back to the levers.

"Major De Witt, you will head for the buried logs on the proving ground, and drive over them at top speed," Jan Pieter ordered.

The major nodded. Jan Pieter Van Bronck studied the driver. Sweat beads had broken out on the back of his neck. The tank picked up speed, headed across the terrain, and Jan Pieter Van Bronck watched the reactions of the two men in the turret with him. Neither Doctor Preston nor Private Von Burdeau showed any reaction.

Suddenly the tank began to swerve from side to side. Jan Pieter Van Bronck released the dogs in the turret escape hatch.

"Get ready to jump for it!" he called to Von Burdeau and Preston. "We have a killer at the controls!"

The soldier and the doctor climbed up the side of the turret like a couple of monkeys. When the tank made an S-curve, they leaped off. De Witt suddenly had a gun in his hand. He lashed out twice with it, viciously, against Captain Raymond's head. Then he grabbed the control levers and straightened the plunging tank.

"All right, killer," Jan Pieter Van Bronck said. "This is the end of your road. I've found out what I wanted to know!"

"So have I, Van Bronck," Major De Witt replied, with some relief. "I figured you'd dope out a way to show up Captain Raymond. He ought to be stood up in front of a firing squad—any man who'd sacrifice his country for his own private good, and build up antagonism between two such strong Allies as the United States and Great Britain."

The forward escape hatch opened, and Major De Witt climbed out. He still held the gun in his hand, and it was stained dark red with Captain Raymond's blood. He turned and gripped the unconscious Raymond by the collar, then turned to Von Burdeau and Doctor Preston who were now hurrying up.

"One of you fellows give me a hand here. The captain's plenty heavy!"

KURT VON BURDEAU supplied the lift, and the body of Captain Raymond was lowered to the ground.

"Why did you have to club him?" Jan Pieter asked.

"He jabbed his gun into my side," Major De Witt declared, "and ordered me to crash the tank. He hoped something would happen to you, I guess."

Jan Pieter nodded slowly, then turned to look at the others. When he turned back to Major De Witt, Van Bronck had a gun firmly gripped in his hand.

"You missed your calling, Major," he said. "You should have been an actor. Captain Raymond is entirely innocent. You are the killer!"

Major De Witt's face went white at the abrupt accusation. Then, in sudden decision, he thrust forward the bloodied gun he held in his hand.

"Drop your gun, Herr Van Bronck!" he commanded.

"Shoot if you like," Jan Pieter told him coldly. He stepped forward until the leveled gun was almost against his rounded paunch. "I unloaded your gun before I gave it to you back at headquarters."

Jan Pieter's gun was moving up slowly. Doctor Preston and Private Von Burdeau sidled apart, out of the line of fire—ready to take the killer from the flanks.

Major De Witt's eyes went from Jan Pieter's face to his own bloodied gun, then he shortened his grip on the weapon, and with an upsweeping motion flung it directly into Jan Pieter's face.

The Dutch detective whirled aside, but the heavy metal weapon struck him in the side of the head. Von Burdeau and the doctor, not quite sure of what was going on, were slow in coming to Van Bronck's aid, and De Witt scrambled over the tottering body of the detective, wrenched his gun from his hand.

Now he trained it upon the sprawling figure of Van Bronck.

Jan Pieter's right hand came up to wipe the blood from his face. At the same moment his left hand scrabbled for the bloody weapon Major De Witt had dropped. He swept up the gun, pointed it at De Witt.

"You've confessed your own guilt, Major," he shouted.

"What is one murder more or less, when it is to avenge Der Fuehrer and help his ally? You have been a fascinating adversary, Herr Van Bronck. It is unfortunate that I must kill you and these other fools!"

The words were scarcely out of Major De Witt's mouth when Jan Pieter's finger tightened on the trigger of his gun, and a bullet crashed into Major De Witt's shoulder. Jan Pieter bounded to his feet, and Doctor Preston and Von Burdeau closed in on the killer.

Military police cars closed in on the scene of the shooting. Captain Raymond was brought around by first aid treatment, and after everything had been cleared up, he drove back to the Battalion Headquarters with Jan Pieter.

"I still don't understand it all," the bewildered captain said.

"It all resolved itself into one thing," Jan Pieter declared. "The real Major De Witt was probably a victim of the enemy, captured when his ship went down during the raid on the convoy. Our friend, the killer, was placed on the rescue boat with Major De Witt's papers, and came here to impersonate him. The poison that killed those soldiers was caused by poison-tipped needles concealed in the rubber cushions of their crash helmets! These poisoned helmets were rigged up by Major De Witt. Since he was supposed to be inspecting the American-made tanks regularly, it was easy for him to doctor the helmets as he pleased. These mysterious deaths were bound to effect the morale of the men in the tank corps. They could hardly be expected to fight their best if they feared they might be struck down by some poison before they could fire a shot."

Captain Raymond patted Van Bronck on the shoulder.

"How did he reveal himself?" he asked.

"Well"—Van Bronck stroked his plump chin—"there were several ways. First of all, when I ordered you fellows to put on your helmets, three of you put them on without delay and strapped them on tight. Obviously, you didn't expect to be poisoned. Major De Witt delayed somewhat, and finally put on a beanie with a woolen ball on its top, before he put on the helmet. If the needle was in his helmet, he figured the beanie would protect him from it."

"Gosh, that's right," Doctor Preston remarked. "Baylor and Hargreaves were killed when the tanks hit the rough ground and the top of their helmets struck the metal framework above them. I didn't find the mark in the autopsy because a doctor seldom looks under the hair for a mark of that kind, and it would be difficult to find it without an extremely careful examination."

"Exactly," Van Bronck agreed. "The radiograms I sent helped, too. One of them gave me a description of the real Major De Witt. It was quite different from our man, but that wasn't sufficient evidence in itself. Now I hope the drivers trained here at Willowmore are going to give the enemy a real shellacking both in the name of the King, and in memory of Hargreaves and Baylor. Those two have been real martyrs."

"You've done a great service yourself, Herr Van Bronck," Captain Raymond pointed out. "What are your plans now?"

"Simple," Jan Pieter Van Bronck declared as he drew out his meerschaum bowl with its new pipe stem. He loaded it up, and slipped it between his lips. "My oxen are rested now, my wagon is all greased up, and I have plenty of supplies to rush down here for the Armored Services. I'll be on my way."

And that afternoon he was on his way, and the soldiers of the South African training base cheered him as he moved through the gates of Willowmore and headed northward, humming the tune of "Pack Your Things and Trek."

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COMING NEXT ISSUE

MORGUE SHEET MUSIC

A Willie Klump Howler by JOE ARCHIBALD

MURDER THROUGH MAGIC

By CURTISS T. GARDNER

Out of the murky haze of a bonfire detective-magician Charles Mallory plucks a vital clue—then battles to balk a plausible trickster and to send a ruthless killer to the death chamber!

CHAPTER I

Wood into Copper

IT WAS while Charles Mallory mixed Old-fashioneds at the built-in bar that Polly Norton's snapping black eyes fixed on the guns which festooned the white pine panels of the clubroom basement.

Mallory had all shapes, calibers and ages of guns, from a modern Japanese Nambu given him by a friend who had been on Kwajalein, to a rare old Forsyth Magazine Lock pistol, one of the few existing specimens of the first invention of percussion firing.

"Quite a collection," Polly remarked.

"Guns have always been one of my hobbies," he told her. "Knowledge of firearms often comes in handy on one of my cases."

"You won't need guns on this investigation for me," Polly said.

"Tell me about it."

She took the stubby red and white glass he handed her. "I want to keep my stepfather from being victimized, if possible. He's getting along in years, you know, and lately he devotes a lot of time to queer things. Occultism, spiritualism, metaphysics. That sort of stuff."

Mallory nodded. The girl's stepfather, Dirk Holland, had lived for many years in the neighborhood. Reputed to be a millionaire, stories of Holland's stinginess had leaked out. Polly, it was reported, had difficulty even in getting enough money from the old man to keep the household going properly.

Yet rumor had Holland willing enough to spend money on dubious undertakings. It said he was eccentric, even gullible. Mallory recalled the stories he had heard. Polly's simple statement jibed with those tales.

"Recently Dad's taken up with a man by the name of Edward Reese who claims he can produce metal from ordinary firewood," Polly went on. "Reese wants Dad to put up quite a lot of money to commercialize this process of his."

"Metal from firewood!" Mallory was thoughtful. "I'd like to have some money of my own in a thing like that. If it could be done. Does this man Reese explain how he intends to do it?"

"He claims to have discovered a new force of nature. A method for rearranging the atoms and molecules which compose matter. Says he does it by power of mind, but I think he also uses a secret chemical."

Mallory gulped his drink. "Mind over matter. I see. And what do you want me to do about this, Miss Norton?"

"Reese is going to give Dad a demonstration," she told him as he refilled the cocktail glasses. "I'd like to have you present. I've heard you're a clever amateur magician as well as private detective. If Reese is a trickster, I want to know it. Of course, if trickery is involved, you'll have to prove it by explaining or duplicating what Reese does. Otherwise, Dad would never believe you." She smiled attractively, and nodded her sleek black head. "For a man like you, it should be simple."

MALLORY beamed at her and then made a gesture of assent.

"Why surely, I'll be glad to help. It should be right down my alley. When is Reese giving this demonstration?"

A BAFFLING COMPLETE CRIME NOVELET

As Mallory leaned toward Holland, Reese tossed some powder from his hand into the fire, and the flames turned suddenly green

"Tonight, late. In back of our own house."

"I'll be there," Mallory promised. "I'll bring my assistant."

"No," she said. "Come alone, please. It's going to be difficult enough for me to handle Dad without too many strangers. And Reese might object, too."

"You can count on me," he said.

She set her glass on the table and arose. "That's settled then. What a relief! I like to feel there's a strong, capable man on whom I can lean."

Mallory grinned.

"Whenever you want to lean, my shoulders are broad," he said.

Polly gave him a sidelong glance. "So I've noticed."

After she had gone, Mallory dragged handcuffs and chains from a cupboard in the wainscoting near the built-in bar. Apparatus he had duplicated from study of Houdini's escapes.

But he quickly discovered he could not put his mind on the magical devices. He was still thinking of his talk with Polly Norton.

"What a luscious client!" he muttered aloud. . . .

Dirk Holland's house was a big rambling affair dating back to a by-gone era. Business had long since started to invade the neighborhood, but the old man's privacy was not impaired. The grounds surrounding the house covered three full acres. They were closed away securely from the world by tall hedges and closely planted rows of Normandy poplars.

Mallory approached the house at ten that night. In spite of Polly's admonition, he had brought Bennie with him.

Mallory liked to refer to Bennie Lesinski as his assistant. Actually, the ex-stage magician, whose billing in more prosperous days had been "The Great Leslie," Bennie had repaid the food and shelter Mallory furnished by coaching which had brought a professional polish to Mallory's hobby, which was amateur magic.

At the side entrance to Holland's big house, the two men parted.

"You know what to do," Mallory said. "But be sure you keep out of sight. Join me at home afterward. I'm counting on you, Bennie."

He watched the shabby little man circle the porte-cochere where light spilled out across the lawn.

Not until Bennie Lesinski was lost in the darkness beyond, did Mallory mount the steps and touch the doorbell.

He could hear a musical chime somewhere inside.

In a moment Polly herself opened the door. She was dressed in flame colored slacks. Spots of color glowed warmly in her cheeks, as if with excitement.

"We've let all the servants off for the night," she whispered to Mallory. "Reese didn't want anyone unnecessary around. I had a little difficulty with him about you, but I insisted."

Mallory gave her arm an encouraging, conspiratorial squeeze.

He followed her into the large old-fashioned living room.

Dirk Holland was sitting in a deep comfortable chair near the big open fireplace.

His shock of snowy hair was stiff and wiry, standing upright like the quills of a porcupine. A week old stubble of white whiskers contributed to his bristly appearance.

Behind strong lenses, his eyes were distorted, one magnified to half again the size of the other.

In spite of Polly's fear that she might have difficulty with her father, Mallory found Holland cordial enough.

"Glad you could be here," he said. "You're just the right man, Mallory. I'm hoping this may prove a history making occasion. Like the first telephone conversation or the completion of the Atlantic cable."

"Seems to be a tall order," Mallory said. He was looking around for Reese, but Holland was alone in the living room. "Making metal out of wood sounds like quite a feat."

"It appears that Reese has discovered a fundamental source of energy never before utilized by man," Holland said very seriously. "Future generations may apply this power source as widely as we now harness the equally mysterious force known as electricity."

Mallory's sun tanned face was bland.

"Then tonight may be a modern version of Ben Franklin and his famous kite experiment," he suggested.

"Exactly." Holland got up from his chair, reaching for a heavy walking stick with a handle made from a solid lump of knobby silver. "Let's see if Reese is ready to begin. He's been preparing his mind alone for more than an hour. It appears that a demonstration like this drains his own strength to a considerable degree."

"I can well imagine," Mallory said. He kept his face expressionless.

Polly followed them as they went through to the back of the house.

The huge kitchen was brilliantly illuminated. Its light shining through the butler's

pantry, created a semi-gloom in the breakfast alcove adjoining.

A MAN was sitting there, his head bowed upon his hands.

He arose as Polly and the two men appeared.

Mallory saw that Edward Reese was tall and cadaverous. His egg-shaped head was bald except for a few sandy hairs plastered greasily across the top center of the skull.

"A friend of Mr. Holland is more than welcome to witness the visual proof of supermundane power which I intend to offer," he said smoothly. "Everything is in readiness. Let us go out."

Holland had a flashlight. He led the way across the lawn behind the house.

Some hundred feet distant, a gridwork of cordwood six feet in height was neatly stacked in a vacant space away from overhanging tree branches.

"This wood was cut last winter from my own premises down on the river," Holland told Mallory. "It's mostly pine, with a little cedar and some birch. We stacked it this afternoon."

Three slope-backed wooden chairs had been placed a safe distance from the pile of wood. Mallory sat down between Holland and Polly Norton.

Covertly Mallory's eyes were exploring the darkness of the wide yard, trying to see if he could catch a glimpse of Bennie. But there was no hint of movement in the gloom.

Reese struck a match. Flames sprouted quickly, with smoke mushrooming skyward.

In spite of the increasing heat, Reese remained close beside the blazing logs. He raised long arms above his head as if praying, but no words passed his lips. The red glow showed Mallory the man's eyeballs protruding, distended as if with a terrific effort of concentration. Sweat glistened on his bald skull.

Then Reese took a small vial from his pocket. From it he dumped into his hand something that looked like powder. When he tossed the powder into the fire, the flames turned suddenly green.

Mallory leaned toward Holland. "What was that?" he said in a whisper.

"He told me he used some chemical as a catalytic agent," Holland whispered back. "A different agent for each type of metal. This is for copper. Green. Don't you see?"

"I thought it would be by will power alone," Mallory objected.

"Later!" the old man shut him up. "Watch!"

CHAPTER II

Hindu Gold

MALLORY could see that Holland was trembling with excitement. The old man leaned forward with a rapt expression on his white stubbled face, licking his dry lips.

The green hue of the flames changed back to red. Reese added more powder. They became green again. Twice Reese repeated this action with the powder.

After a while the grid of logs suddenly collapsed as the bottom layer burned through. The mass of burning wood which remained was shapeless.

With his bony features turned toward the watchers, Reese continued to stare bug-eyed at the fire. His lips moved now continuously, but he did not speak aloud.

It would be a better performance, Mallory was thinking, if Reese had worn a long pointed cap like the pictures in children's books of Merlin the Magician. But it was a good act nevertheless. Certainly it was making a profound impression upon Dirk Holland.

When the fire had finally burned down to a pile of glowing coals, Reese picked up a long stick from somewhere in the grass and began to poke among the embers.

"Here," he said suddenly. "Look, my friends! I have been successful as I expected."

"As I expected, too," Mallory repeated to himself.

They all moved closer. Where Reese was pointing with the stick, a reddish mass of metal long as Mallory's forearm and as thick, reposed among the hot coals.

"Amazing! Absolutely incredible!" It was Dirk Holland exclaiming.

"What do you think?" Polly Norton said at Mallory's ear.

Reese was a trickster, of that Mallory was sure. But it wouldn't do to say so.

She had told him she expected an explanation or duplication of the seeming miracle. Otherwise, she would not be convinced.

In the back of his mind a vague memory plagued him. But it was hazy and therefore worthless. He'd consult Bennie.

If anyone would know, it should be The Great Leslie.

"I don't know," Mallory stalled. "Not yet."

He turned to Reese.

"The powder?" he asked. "What was it?"

The tall man had his back now to the coals. His face was invisible.

"A solvent," Reese said. "A vital part of my secret."

Mallory didn't expect the secret to be revealed. Not until a substantial amount of money had passed. But he had to say something.

"Can't you give us an idea of the principle behind the thing?"

Reese shrugged and then turned majestically to the private detective.

"Suppose we say that it is fundamentally a matter of tuning the mind into contact with the highest centers of Universal Power," he said in his oily tones. "Through years of proper mental preparation I have acquired ability to contact those centers."

"In other words you live right," Mallory said.

The man hesitated. A faint note of hostility crept into his voice.

"To commune with the Infinite, one must necessarily lead an ascetic life. There are lamas in Thibet, yogis in India who have also learned the secret."

"That's too far from home," Mallory said.

He was anxious to leave now, and talk to Bennie.

As they moved back toward the house, Holland fell into step with Mallory.

"I think I shall back Reese," he said. "Copper out of firewood should be a wonderful investment."

"Snap judgment is unreliable," Mallory observed. "Sleep on it. Wait awhile."

"But you saw with your own eyes," Holland protested.

Mallory didn't answer that.

They went around the side of the house toward the street, Holland lighting the way with his flashlight. Reese and Polly were behind.

To the left, an outbuilding loomed.

"My woodshed," Holland chuckled. "Sixteen cords right here. I own acres of woodland along the river. Should get enough copper to make it a very profitable investment indeed."

As he spoke, he turned the light toward the frame structure, pointing the heavy walking stick with the other hand. The light beam traveled along rows of neatly stacked logs. It touched a pair of legs which protruded from behind the nearest row.

"What's that!"

Mallory leaped forward. Holland jerked a dangling cord. An electric light inside the shed glowed, sending forth bright rays in all directions.

The legs belonged to a small shabby figure.

Mallory went down on his knees beside the limp body.

"Bennie!" he whispered.

The little ex-magician lay very still. Mallory's fingers closed lightly over Bennie's wrist He held his breath.

It eased from his lips with a sigh of relief when he felt the pulse still beating. Faintly.

Bennie was still alive.

"You know this man?" Polly Norton sounded incredulous.

"My assistant," Mallory said shortly.

Concern for his friend made it unimportant now whether the girl resented his deception or not.

AFTER a rapid examination, Mallory uttered a deep sigh.

"Someone call a doctor," he ordered. "Bennie's badly hurt."

Bennie's eyelids fluttered faintly. He tried to say something. Mallory leaned close.

"Hindu—gold," Bennie whispered. "Miracle."

He lay still again, breathing heavily. There was a little blood on the side of his head. Mallory looked closely. A big raw bruise was the cause of the bleeding. Evidently Bennie had received a blow over the head.

"Your assistant?" Reese said inquiringly. "I don't understand."

Mallory disregarded the man.

"Call a doctor. Get the doctor over to my house right away. I'm going to carry Bennie there myself."

"You'd better take him upstairs here," Holland suggested. "We have plenty of room."

"Thanks. But it isn't far to lug him and I'd rather have Bennie under my own roof. . . ."

When Alice Abbey came by next noon, Mallory was in his clubroom, fussing half-heartedly with his magical paraphernalia. He dropped his ropes and handcuffs to answer her shave-and-a-haircut-bay-rum knock on the door beside the basement steps.

Alice was just a little thing, but her figure had curves in just the right places. Her eyes were brown with golden specks and her skin the color of rich, sweet cream. Her lips were like red rosebuds just flowering into perfection.

"Why so glum looking today?" she chided him gayly. "Don't tell me this Pretty Polly you were telling me about didn't come through after all with that case for the Master Mind."

"It's no joke," he assured her gravely. "Last night Bennie had an accident and we had a doctor in, working on him for hours."

The tap of high heels sounded on the stairs in the upper part of the house. Alice glanced up inquiringly.

From the first floor landing a girl appeared. A shapely, buxom redhead. Considerable eye-shadow and liberally applied make-up gave her a somewhat theatrical appearance.

"I'm going to have lunch now," the redhead informed Mallory. She gave Alice an appraising glance. "No change in his condition. He still keeps talking about Hindu Gold."

"Okay, Mabel," Mallory said. "You'll find some stuff in the refrigerator. Help yourself. Only save some of those lobster tails for me."

Mabel's red heels tapped back to the first floor. Alice lifted her eyebrows. Her rosebud mouth was compressed into an ominous straight line.

"Perhaps my being here is cramping your style," she said coldly. "Shall I run along?"

He stopped her with an uplifted hand.

"Wait a minute, honey! You're going off half cocked. Mabel's here to look after Bennie. She used to be his stage assistant and she hasn't worked for a long time."

"So now you're turning your home into a refuge for all kinds of broken down show people," she cried angrily. "Honestly, Chuck, I can't imagine why I still keep trying to make something of you. What's all this about Hindu Gold?"

"Bennie," he said. "He's lying upstairs with a bad concussion." He told her what had happened the night before. "Lucky he wasn't killed. At least he hasn't a fractured skull. The doctor said someone should stay with him all the time. No telling what he might do while he's out of his mind. That's why I thought of Mabel and brought her in. I can't afford a regular trained nurse."

She met his eyes steadily. "So this is the wind-up of your attempt at being a private detective? Now how about letting me find you a real job? I have a good opportunity which came in just this morning with the Daimlon Metal Products Company. They need an expediter."

Mallory spoke with a trace of bitterness.

"My, how you enjoy being a girl executive and running that employment service of yours," he said. "Can't you get it through that little head of yours, honey, that I just wouldn't be happy punching a time clock?"

"But a man with your brains and ability just can't sit around and loaf forever."

"I didn't say I'd quit the investigation game. You're the one who said it. In addition to keeping Reese from milking Dirk Holland, I've got to find out now who conked Bennie."

"How do you expect to do that?"

"I'm not sure yet. But Reese pulled a trick, I'm positive. And a trick can always be duplicated."

"Look, Chuck, I'll make a bargain with you." Alice faced him, her dimpled chin thrust forward and a determined light in her deep brown eyes. "If you can really handle this affair to a successful conclusion, and in a reasonable length of time, I'll stop begging you to take a regular job. But if you don't, then you go to work at Daimlon Metal. Is it a bargain?"

"But why?"

THE girl made a gesture of impatience. "You're just playing at being a detective," she said. "It was just one of your wacky impulses when you put up that shingle for yourself. You haven't really worked at it and I don't think you ever will."

Mallory looked down at her fondly, noting the red glints in her soft blond hair, the cute way she wrinkled her turned-up nose. He was very fond of Alice, he realized. Sometimes he almost hated himself for the mental quirk which kept him from marrying her and settling down as she wanted him to. It was a wonder Alice bothered with him at all. He sighed.

"What do you call a reasonable length of time?"

"Twenty-four hours."

"Oh, wait now!" His tenderness toward the girl caught him completely off guard. "Make it forty-eight hours."

"It's a bargain!"

The instant the words were uttered, Mallory was full of regrets. But it was too late. He was trapped. By his own weakness.

Alice glowed. "It's all settled. I know I'm going to be proud of you, Chuck."

After Alice had gone, Mallory sat for a half hour staring at the wall. But he wasn't seeing the white pine panels hung with his collection of firearms. The pictures passing through his mind were those of Dirk Holland's estate and the blazing pile of cordwood from which Reese had produced the small copper billet.

Finally he arose, went to the first floor and the booklined cubbyhole he liked to call his office. He rooted among the books for a while. Then he walked thoughtfully into the kitchen.

A small pile of freshly washed dishes

showed that Mabel had finished her lunch. Mallory took a bowl with the lobster tails from the refrigerator. He put them in a pan with butter, set them under the gas flame in the oven.

All the time they were cooking, he sat in a hard, straightbacked chair trying to think. He had to do something, he told himself. The one-sided agreement with Alice had him really on a spot.

Ugly pictures filled his mind. Alarm clocks with the hands standing at six a.m. Wintry street corners and crowded trolleys. Himself punching a time clock at the Daimlon plant. For, however rashly given, he would keep his word.

When he had finished his lunch, he went on up to the second floor. Bennie lay in one of the bedrooms. The little man's eyes were closed. He was breathing heavily but regularly.

"Mabel!" Mallory called.

There was no answer. Anxiously he stared about him. Mabel had disappeared!

CHAPTER III

Death in the Clubroom

COMPRESSING his lips into a hard, grim line, Mallory started to investigate. He found no sign of the red-headed girl anywhere. Mallory went downstairs and brought an armload of books back up with him. For an hour he stayed in the room with Bennie, thumbing the pages.

At the end of that time he heard the front door close softly. A moment more and Mabel came up. She had on a tan corduroy coat over her beige suit and she walked on tiptoe to keep her spike heels from clicking on the stair treads.

Mallory spoke angrily. "Where have you been?"

"Out to lunch." She seemed surprised, as if she hadn't expected to find him upstairs. "I told you I was going."

"I didn't know you were leaving the house. Bennie shouldn't have been left alone."

"There wasn't much in the ice box." She sounded sullen. "Anyhow, I wasn't gone long."

"Long enough for him to have walked out a window, maybe."

Mallory leaned over the bed again. The little man was motionless. The thought crossed Mallory's mind that Bennie acted as if he were drugged. The effect of the head blow, no doubt.

That night Mallory didn't sleep well. He lay awake a long time, beating his brain for answers that refused to come. And when he finally slept, it was to be awakened suddenly by a crash which echoed through the empty house like the explosion of a block buster bomb.

"Aieeeeee!"

The shot and the woman's scream both came from somewhere in the lower part of the house.

Reaching for his flashlight, Mallory sprang out of bed. The flashlight tunneled through blackness as Mallory raced, barefooted, for the stairs. He was halfway down when a door slammed somewhere.

He lingered on the ground floor only long enough to yank the back door open. The small yard was silent and deserted. Mallory took the steps to the basement three at a time.

Mabel was in the clubroom. Her hair, now, was a more startling shade of red. A trail of the same vivid hue showed where she had dragged herself along the rubber-tiled floor. Near the beginning of the crimson path lay a revolver from Mallory's collection.

He dropped beside the girl, raising her in his arms. She was limp. Her eyes already glazing. Gently he laid her down again. He went to the phone, dialed police headquarters, asked for his friend, Lieutenant George Julian.

Julian, a lean, hatchet-faced veteran with a liberal salting of gray in his brick-red thatch, arrived with a carload of detail men in surprisingly short time.

"Who's the girl?" he asked first, yawning sleepily.

"An ex-magician's helper. She's been acting as a nurse." He went on to explain about Bennie, neglecting however, to go into the details of how Bennie had received his head injury.

Using his handkerchief to avoid smudging fingerprints, Julian picked the murder gun from the floor.

"Smith and Wesson, forty-five caliber," he remarked.

"From my own collection," Mallory said. He pointed to a vacant space on the wall from which the revolver had been taken.

"I suppose you realize this doesn't look at all good for you, Mallory?"

"I know." Mallory shrugged wearily. "My prints will be on the gun, of course. I

cleaned it just the other evening. Undoubtedly the killer wore gloves."

He stared placidly at Julian for a moment or two.

"You don't really think I did it, do you George?" he asked, after a pause.

"Can you explain how an outsider could have obtained your gun?" Julian asked sharply.

"There's a pane of glass broken in the door," Mallory said. He jerked his thumb toward the rear portion of the basement. "It has been that way two months. Anyone could reach through and turn the latch."

"Why didn't you get it fixed?"

"I didn't think it did any harm. You know how hard it is these days to get anyone to do repair jobs."

"You could easily have done it yourself with a glass cutter and some putty."

Something in Mallory's brain clicked at the police lieutenant's remark. The vague memory with which his subconscious had struggled since watching Reese in Holland's back yard, suddenly came into clear focus in his conscious mind.

"It seemed like a formidable job," he said. There was a broad grin on his square, good-looking face. "I'm mighty glad now I didn't."

"You're glad!" Amazement spread over Julian's sharp countenance. "I ought to take you in for observation in the psychopathic ward, Mallory. I'm beginning to think you're a nut. Here you are up to the neck in murder and . . ."

Mallory's grin spread. "You and Alice Abbey. My friends don't properly appreciate my versatile genius. The murderer would have come in some other way, anyhow."

Julian snorted. "Genius? Get out of my way, Mallory. I've got work to do and I don't know how I'm going to get you out of this rap."

"I'll do it myself," Mallory said. He was strangely confident.

THE police doctor, who had gone upstairs, came down again.

"The man," the doctor said. "This stage magician. I took a look at him. Evidently he's under the influence of drugs."

Mallory looked puzzled. "I don't recall Dr. Wiley giving Bennie a sedative." He stopped abruptly, snapping his fingers. "Got it!"

"Got what?" Julian demanded.

"The motive. And with the motive, it should be duck soup to find the murderer."

"You'd better tell me," Julian ordered.

"The motive is Hindu Gold," Mallory said. "That's what Bennie was raving about in his delirium. I didn't understand it then."

George Julian snorted. "Why, of course. I should have thought of that. Hindu Gold. So the murderer, therefore, must be an Indian Maharajah."

"Go ahead and laugh. Bennie recovered enough to talk more. To Mabel. She saw a chance to make some easy money. She gave Bennie some pills so he wouldn't say anything to me. Then she went out to see the person she thought would give her money. And that person slipped in here tonight to shut her up permanently."

"You can explain in more detail downtown," Julian said.

An expression of alarm spread over Mallory's face.

"Oh, no. You can't do that to me, George! I've got this whole thing right in the hollow of my hand. It's my big chance."

"You don't suppose I can just walk off without you. You aren't completely crazy?"

"You don't have to bother me for a short while," Mallory insisted. "I'll have this whole affair cleared within twenty-four hours. You ought to do that much for an old friend."

Julian hesitated. "You'll probably only get yourself in a worse jam."

"It couldn't be worse. If I don't crack this, I've promised to let Alice pick me a job. With a time clock and everything."

"You'll be lucky if you don't get a lifetime job making little ones out of big ones," Julian warned him softly.

"But you'll give me my chance?"

Julian sighed. "I shouldn't, but I will. Do your stuff, pal. But fast. I don't know how long I can let things ride."

Soon after this, Julian left the house and went back to Police Headquarters.

At about nine o'clock the next morning Mallory showed up at Dirk Holland's home. Which for Mallory was very early.

In white silk slacks which emphasized the jet black of her hair and eyes, Polly Norton made a charming picture.

"Why, Mr. Mallory!" she said with a smile. "We were just wondering when we'd see you again."

Dirk Holland was in the living room. So was Edward Reese. Mallory dropped into a chair. Absent-mindedly he took a quarter from his pocket, holding it between his thumb and second finger. A toss of his hand and the coin was gone. He clutched at the air and it was back again.

"How's your assistant?" Holland asked. "I never did quite understand who he was and what happened."

Behind his heavy spectacles the old man's eyes were magnified into fantastic disproportion.

"Bennie's getting along nicely," Mallory said. "What happened was complicated."

Reese sat silently, his slightly protuberant, pale blue eyes fixed on Mallory.

"I rather expected to hear from you before now," Polly remarked.

It sounded to Mallory like a reproof.

"I've been very busy," he said. He vanished the quarter again, made it reappear. Suddenly he appeared to realize what he was doing.

"Good stunt," he remarked, smiling in self approval. "You try it. Here."

He held the coin toward Reese. The tall man shook his egg-shaped head decidedly.

"I'm no sleight-of-hand artist. Such things don't interest me."

"You do it like this," Mallory insisted. He moved his hand slowly, showing how the forefinger pressed over the tip of the thumb, forcing the quarter back between the fingers where it was hidden from view when his palm was outward.

"Try it once."

He handed the coin to Holland.

The old man laid his club-like walking cane on the floor. Awkwardly, he attempted to duplicate Mallory's motions, peering at the coin intently from behind his glasses the while. It slipped and bounced on the rug.

Mallory retrieved it and gave it to Polly.

"Requires a bit more nimbleness," he said. "You can do it though, I'm sure."

The girl rolled the quarter in her fingers. After two or three attempts she succeeded in palming it. Smilingly she handed it back.

MALLORY shoved it into his pocket. Briskly he turned back to Edward Reese.

"Made any more copper since the other night?"

"I didn't make the copper," Reese corrected. He seemed very sure of himself now and his tone was definitely unfriendly. "It is simply the application of a natural law as I believe I have already explained several times before."

"The law of survival of the fittest," Mallory murmured.

"I don't understand you."

Mallory let it ride.

"I've decided to go into the venture, Mallory," Holland said. "It looks good to me."

"How much have you been asked to put up?" Mallory asked bluntly.

The cadaverous Reese was frowning. Behind Holland's back, as he turned to Mallory, Polly shook her black curls slightly, as if to warn Mallory against further discussion of the subject.

Holland's look was inquiring. "I'm going to invest one hundred thousand dollars. Is there any good reason why I shouldn't?"

"The way Reese applies the principle is too complicated," Mallory said. "It can be greatly simplified. Also, it can be done for much less money."

"Explain yourself, Mallory."

But Mallory got to his feet.

"If you'll come over to my place this afternoon," he told Holland, "I'll demonstrate what I mean. Then you can judge for yourself."

Holland stared, his white crest bristling like a startled porcupine. The look in the eyes of Edward Reese was murderous. Even Polly's smooth olive brow was creased with bewilderment as she went with Mallory to the door.

Pausing there, she dropped her voice so the others could not hear.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

But Mallory wouldn't elaborate.

"You wanted a detective," he said. "You've got one. A good one! Be sure and come over with your stepfather this afternoon."

Back home, Mallory went straight to the telephone and put in a call to Police Headquarters. Lieutenant Julian, he was informed, had been up most of the night so had gone home to sleep. Mallory left word for Julian to call back.

After he cradled the receiver, he went to his wood pile and selected a thick, round birch log. He took it with him to his work bench in the basement behind the clubroom, where he clamped it into a vise. With a brace and bit he began to bore holes into one end of the log.

He was cutting out the wood between the drill holes with a chisel when a man's hand reached through the broken pane of the basement door. The noise of Mallory's hammering drowned the faint click the latch made as it opened.

The first indication Mallory had that he was not alone came when a harsh voice spoke.

"Get your hands into the air, Mallory!"

Mallory swung around. Edward Reese was standing in the doorway, armed and desperate!

A cold shiver went through Mallory, for he knew that he was looking at death. He had not given Reese credit for being smart enough to act so swiftly. That had been Mallory's one big mistake.

CHAPTER IV

Sinister Charlatan

THE THIN bald-headed man was holding a big automatic. It's snout was directed at Mallory's chest.

Mallory dropped his hammer. His fingers reached toward the ceiling beams.

Reese wore his unpleasant smile. "That's right. I'll drive from here in. You've had your turn."

"Don't be an utter fool, Reese. Put that gun away. First thing you know you'll be in over your head."

Reese was still smiling as he edged into the room.

"I can take care of myself," he said. He nodded toward the work bench. "Neat little carpentry job you're doing."

"Isn't it? But I haven't any copper handy. I thought I'd make it iron instead. Then I could use an old clock weight. The kind of metal is a detail. The Hindu Holy Man used gold, of course."

"How did you get wise? I didn't think that trick was in the books."

"If it is, I couldn't find it," Mallory admitted. "A friend of mine happened to mention something about putty. That recalled the explanation Thurston the Magician once gave of the Hindu Gold Miracle after seeing it performed in India. A prepared log with the gold inside. Puttied up and painted and added to the fire. You dressed up the stunt a little by sprinkling Greek fire into the blaze to give pretty colors."

"You'd have been a lot smarter to keep your mouth shut," Reese observed. He glanced toward the clubroom. "Get inside there!"

Prodded by the gun, Mallory went through the connecting door. Reese spotted a coil of new manila rope on the floor near the built-in bar.

"Lean against the wall," he ordered. "Legs out and your weight on the palms of your hands."

Methodically Reese tied Mallory's legs. Then he forced Mallory to lie flat on his back. He secured Mallory's hands also.

When he had finished, Reese stepped back and surveyed his handiwork complacently.

"I guess that will hold you awhile," he said.

Mallory met the man's chilly eyes squarely.

"A girl was shot to death in this room last night, Reese," he answered. "Murder is a dangerous game, for all concerned." He was talking now to gain time. Meanwhile, his ears strained to hear the sound he expected. "You don't think you can get away with murder, do you, Reese?"

The thin bald-headed man looked surprised. "Did I say I was going to kill you?"

Mallory heard then what he was waiting for. The faint click of the latch on the basement door.

This time it was Reese who was oblivious.

"What I want is the hundred gees," Reese admitted. "And that's what I intend to have."

"You're a worse sucker than I thought, then," Mallory said. His eyes were on the connecting door from the clubroom to his work shop. "If you think you're going to get it all. If you think you'll even get any of it."

"I'll get it all right."

"You'd better let me loose while there's still time," Mallory warned him. "You don't want to be an accessory before the fact, do you? You have no blood on your hands—yet. All you're guilty of is an attempted confidence game."

There was sweat on Mallory's face. He saw someone slide around the edge of the door into the clubroom. He didn't dare look directly, but the tail of his eye followed the figure across the floor behind Reese. He talked fast and loud to distract the man's attention.

"You poor fool, you don't even realize what's been going on. You conked poor Bennie, sure. When you found him snooping around your trick bonfire. But you didn't know Bennie was The Great Leslie. You didn't think he knew anything. Bennie recovered enough to talk. When Mabel came to you and threatened to queer your game unless she was cut in on the deal, you ran right to your employer about it."

"You know a lot, don't you?" Reese said.

The figure was right behind Reese now.

"Can't you see that you won't be allowed to live after you've served your purpose?" Mallory said. "First it was Mabel. You know just enough about that killing to make you dangerous. Now it's me. And after I'm out of the way, you'll be next on the list. Some dark night you'll turn up with a slug through your own thick skull."

Reese laughed harshly. "After I once get my hands on that hundred grand, I'll know what to do."

"You intend to blow town," Mallory said.

"Do you think you'll get away with it?"

"Sure."

Polly Norton jabbed her little pearl handled Colt into the tall man's back. Without her shoes, she had made no sound coming across the rubber-tiled floor. Reese started violently.

"You dirty double-crosser!" Polly snapped.

She lashed out with her tiny gun. It clipped Reese on the side of his bald dome. He dropped as if he'd been shot through the heart. The big automatic slipped from his grasp and slid along the rubber tiles.

SUDDENLY Mallory grinned. He felt limp with relief.

"You'll have to learn how to control that temper, baby," he chided. "Otherwise, you'll never make a big success of crime. How do you expect to use Reese for digging that hundred thousand bucks from your stepfather if you destroy the mysterious force that produces copper?"

The girl's oval face was a mask. All but her eyes. The slitted pupils were like points of fire in black coals.

"Big strong men should use their muscles and not attempt to strain their minds," she said. She brought the little Colt to bear on him. Curiosity delayed her finger on the trigger. "How did you know it wasn't Reese who shot the nurse?"

"Baby, you told me all about it yourself," Mallory said.

Her amazement was genuine. "I did! How?"

"By doing that coin trick for me this morning. I got a good look at your hands."

"I don't understand."

"That's because you know nothing about guns," he explained patiently. "You used my forty-five caliber Smith and Wesson revolver to kill Mabel. That particular make has a bothersome peculiarity. It's made with a thin narrow grip and has a straight, nearly vertical part of the metal frame extending above the back of the grip near the top. Unless the person using the gun is accustomed to it and knows how to take care of the recoil, that straight piece of metal will invariably bruise the web of the shooting hand between thumb and forefinger. You have a mark like that on your hand, Polly."

She took a quick look at her hand.

You're right," she said quietly. "Of course, I can't let you live."

"You never intended to," he said. "You're desperate to get that money from your stepfather, Polly. Why?"

"He has plenty," she informed him. "He's willing to waste it on charlatans, like Reese. But me, his own stepdaughter, he never gives me what I need. He hasn't even remembered me in his will!"

"You really don't need it," Mallory said. "Not where you're going, Polly babe. You can't take it with you. Because, you see, my old friend, Lieutenant Julian of the city police has been upstairs on the first floor listening to all this conversation."

He raised his voice. "Come on down, George! Here's you're killer!"

The girl whirled with the tiny gun outthrust. As she did so, Mallory's muscles contracted. The ropes around him hung suddenly slack. He rolled, twisting and squirming at the same time.

By the time Polly Norton had turned back toward him, Mallory's hands were free and they held Reese's automatic.

They fired at the same instant. The bullet from the little Colt cracked past Mallory's ear like the snap of a thin, deadly whip. His bigger slug caught the girl in the fleshy part of her gun arm.

She cried out, grabbed her arm. The little gun bounced on the rubber tiles. Mallory slipped from the remaining ropes and picked it up.

* * * * *

It was evening. Reese and Polly Norton were in cells downtown. Alice Abbey and Lieutenant Julian sat in the clubroom while Mallory mixed Old-fashioneds behind the built-in bar. Mallory juggled ice cubes. He chuckled in high good humor.

"Well, Alice, you can get someone else to take that job at the Daimlon plant," he said. "As a detective, I'm doing just fine."

George Julian snorted. "Fine! If you didn't have more dumb luck than any three men deserve, you'd be holding down a slab at the morgue right this minute."

Mallory let out a bellow like an angry bull.

"Luck!" he cried. "How can you call it luck when I've practiced Houdini escapes for months. It was my own skill and knowledge of magic that turned the trick."

"But Chuck, how did you get free from those ropes?" Alice asked.

Mallory's face brightened with complete self assurance. "Largely a matter of muscular control. Tensing the muscles to expand the body when you're tied, contracting them later to loosen the cords. There's a lot to it. Only way I really could explain would be to give you lessons. I'd be glad to undertake the job."

"Okay, pal," Julian said. "Just keep up this

(Concluded on Page 97)

THE EYES OF DEATH

By KERRY McROBERTS

Intrigue and Murder Stalk the Old Grayson Place!

STEADILY falling snow that was covering the grounds of the old Grayson place beneath a mantle of white muffled the night sounds. Wind rattled the windows of the big house with ghost fingers as Death lingered in the shadows.

"Beastly night out." Clark Thorn, standing in front of the fire burning in the open hearth in the living room, swung around as he spoke. "How is our dear uncle's health this evening, Jim? Poorly, I hope."

"He doesn't appear any worse than usual," Jim Langston, Thorn's cousin, said. "I've just been reading to him."

"Little Red Riding Hood, or Goldilocks and the Three Bears?" jeered Thorn. "Uncle's taste in literature is appalling."

It took only that sneering remark to make Langston fully realize how much he hated the tall man in front of the fire. He couldn't bear the faint, sardonic smirk that always was on Clark Thorn's dark, thin face, as though he knew some unpleasant secret he refused to reveal to the world. Langston was resentful, also. Their uncle, Henry Grayson, was old and ill, and if he enjoyed having someone read fairy tales to him, that was no reason for Thorn's scorn.

"I don't mind reading Uncle Henry the sort of stories he likes," Langston said, eyeing his tall cousin with considerable scorn himself. "You know, Clark, there are times when you remind me of a vulture waiting for a feast."

For an instant the two glared at each other—one dark and sardonic, the other blond and boyish. Yet Jim Langston was not really boyish. He had seen service overseas, and in experience and suffering was far older than he looked.

"A vulture, eh?" Thorn repeated thoughtfully. "Because I'm frank enough to hope the old man will die so I'll inherit my share of his milions. I suppose you've never even thought of such a thing, Jim?"

"Not particularly," Langston said tightly. "Uncle Henry is an old man—almost ninety. I'm afraid he won't live much longer." He changed the subject abruptly. "I managed to get a job today in town. I start working for a private detective agency Monday."

"You—a detective!" Thorn laughed. "Well now, that is something. Why, you couldn't find elephant tracks in deep snow."

"Of course not." Langston smiled amiably. "Most elephants have too much sense to go trailing around in snow, if they can help it."

HE GLANCED toward the door as Norton Hill, old man Grayson's secretary entered the room. Hill was thin-faced, and the black patch he wore over his left eye gave him something the look of an old-time pirate. He had lost his left eye in an accident

The masked man held a gun

five years ago, and Jim Langston could not recall ever having seen the secretary when not wearing that black patch.

"Mr. Grayson wants to see you both right away," Hill abruptly informed. "Told me to ask you to come up to his room at once." The secretary's right eye was keenly blue and bright as he gazed at the two men. "He has decided to change his will. I'm to have his attorney here the first thing in the morning."

"How delightful," Clark Thorn drawled ironically. "Probably has decided to cut us off without a cent."

Langston didn't say anything as he rose from his chair. Hill stepped back out into the long, shadowy hallway of the old house and disappeared. Hill, Langston thought, would know what all this was about, for he

had been the old millionaire's secretary for three years now—handled all his business affairs.

"You go up and see Uncle Henry first, Jim," Thorn suggested. "Maybe you can talk him out of changing the will. He likes you. I'll be up later."

There didn't seem much sense in arguing about it. Langston was fully aware that he did appear to be his uncle's favorite nephew. The old man seemed to like to talk to him, liked to have Langston read him fairy tales.

Henry Grayson had been good to his two sisters' sons. Jim Langston, at least, was grateful for that. He realized that for years, since he and Thorn had been left orphans, that the millionaire had raised them as though they were his own boys.

Langston left the living room and went along the hall until he reached the winding staircase leading to the second floor. He felt restless and ill-at-ease, vaguely conscious that there was something bleak and forbidding about the old house tonight. It seemed to hold a ghostly atmosphere that made the shadows seem more than unusually black and dense. Shadows that appeared to be hiding something.

The stairs were steep and poorly lighted. Something caught Langston's ankle as he reached the first landing and tripped him. He fell heavily, to land with a thud on the thick stair carpet. But he quickly discovered that he wasn't hurt, and scrambled to his feet.

There was no sound save the far-off moaning of the wind outside and the soft rustle of snow against the windows. Wondering what had caused his fall, Jim Langston leaned down and found a strong black cord had been tied across the landing from one side to the other.

"M-m-m," he muttered. "If a man had tripped over that coming downstairs he would have fallen all the way down and probably have broken his neck."

And even with the thought he had a vision of a proud old man who always insisted in descending those stairs alone at dinner time each evening. If Henry Grayson had tripped over that cord, just the shock of the fall might have killed him.

"But we finished dinner two hours ago," Langston mused thoughtfully. "Why put that cord there now? Uncle Henry isn't likely to come down again until tomorrow evening."

Langston shivered, without quite realizing just why. It was as though the cold breath of Death had breathed on his neck. That black cord stretched across the stairs looked like a deliberate attempt at murder. But had the trap been intended for Henry Grayson, or for someone else in the house?

He hesitated, then reached down and carefully untied both ends of the threadlike cord. He rolled it up, thrust it into a pocket of his coat, then went on up the stairs.

When he reached the second floor and went along the hall, he saw that the door of his uncle's room was open. The light shining out from inside gleamed on the hall carpet like melted butter.

Langston entered his uncle's room, closing the door behind him. The old man was sitting up in bed, and a look of fear was on his face as he stared hard at the closed door of a closet. With his thick white hair and white mustache he looked much as Mark Twain looked when an old man.

"In there!" he said to Jim Langston, and nodded toward the closet. "I heard a strange noise. It frightened me. Please see what it is, Jim."

"What sort of a noise?" Langston asked, as he moved toward the closet.

"A strange rustling sound," said his uncle, and added querulously, "What's the matter with this house tonight? Martin knows I always drink my glass of warm milk at exactly nine. It is nine-thirty, and he hasn't brought it yet."

That Martin, the butler, hadn't brought the milk was surprising. Martin always seemed to Langston to work by clock-work. Everything the old servant did each day and night was always done at exactly the same time.

JIM LANGSTON moved over to the closet, but hesitated as he reached the door. He listened, but could hear no sound inside it. He wondered if his uncle couldn't have imagined the noise.

"Don't stand there!" snapped Grayson impatiently. "Do something!"

Langston opened the closet door. The space inside was unusually large, as were most of the closets in the old house. It was dark, but a pale face stared out at Langston, although it was little more than a white blur.

"Find anything?" Grayson demanded anxiously.

As the old man was on the bed, the open door prevented him from seeing inside the closet. Langston stepped into it without answering. He drew out a pocket flashlight and switched it on. Martin, the butler, was hanging by a hook that had been thrust through the back of his coat collar. He was dead—a knife still sticking in his heart.

"Jim!" The voice of the old man on the bed rose hysterically. "What is it? What have you found?"

Langston thought swiftly. His uncle's heart was weak—any sudden shock might prove too much for him. Learning that body was hanging in the closet might kill him.

"There's nothing here, Uncle Henry," Langston said quietly. "I am just making sure."

He glanced around the edge of the door, then drew it closed just far enough to be able

to peer through the crack without being seen. For he had just seen something else—the door leading out into the hall being slowly opened. The next moment a man appeared in the doorway. A man with a soft hat pulled down over his eyes, and wearing a cloth mask that covered all of his face, save for eyes that peered through holes cut in the mask. In his right hand he held a gun.

"Who are you—what do you want?" cried Henry Grayson, as he gazed at his strange visitor. "Go away! Get out!"

Jim Langston made no sound, no move, watching through the crack of the closet door, but with muscles tensed to spring out. His gaze was fixed on the bright eyes that peered through the holes of the mask, and he was glad that he had not switched on the electric light in the closet.

"You were a fool to tell everyone you plan to change your will." The masked man's voice was harsh, evidently disguised. He strode in, closing the room door behind him. "You'll never get a chance to change that will now!"

Langston ached to rush out and tackle the masked man, but held himself in. Unarmed as he was, he would have to watch his chance to take this intruder by surprise. This must be the man who had murdered Martin, and he would not hesitate to strike again.

"What do you mean?" Grayson cried wildly. "You—you're going to kill me before I can change my will?"

"You've guessed it!" the man in the mask said grimly.

Langston acted then, as swift inspiration came to him. Reaching out he found the light bulb and quickly unscrewed it. He drew a bone handled penknife from his pocket, opened the blade and thrust it into the light socket, careful that his fingers did not touch any steel. There was a flash from the socket —and the lights in the room went out as he blew a fuse.

Flinging open the closet door he lunged across the room toward where the masked man had been standing. In the sudden darkness the killer could not see him coming. Langston struck hard, and knocked the man back.

"Lights—lights!" shouted Henry Grayson. "He'll murder me in the dark!"

Something hard struck Langston's shoulder a glancing blow—probably the gun in the killer's hand. He let go with a hard right, and nearly fell flat on his face when his fist met nothing but empty air.

He heard the door open swiftly, then bang shut. There was a sound of swiftly running feet out in the hall, then silence. The murderer had made his escape. The old man was still yelling wildly.

"He's gone, Unce Henry," Jim Langston called as he edged closer to the bed. "It's all right now. I drove the killer away."

Grayson stopped shouting. The lights came on. Evidently someone in the kitchen had put a new fuse in the fuse box. Langston knew he had blown out only one circuit. Probably most of the house lights were still on.

ALMOST at the moment the lights went on, there were hurried footsteps in the hall. The door was flung open.

Clark Thorn stood there looking at his uncle anxiously.

"I heard you shouting, Uncle Henry!" Thorn exclaimed. "What's wrong?"

The old man was lying weakly back on his pillows.

"A masked man was here—said he was going to kill me, because I was going to change my will."

"I drove him away," Jim Langston said coldly, intently studying his cousin. "And I'm wondering, Clark, after our conversation downstairs, if you mightn't have had something to do with this."

"Careful, Jim!" Thorn glared at him. "You don't start working as a private detective until next week. Forget the Sherlock Holmes act now."

As the two cousins stared at each other challengingly, Norton Hill came hurrying into the room. The black patch over his left eye stood out, and there was a faint red mark across his forehead. Hill had a large head.

"I don't see why anyone would want to kill me because I planned to change my will," Henry Grayson was complaining. "I still intended to leave my two nephews the greater part of my estate. I just wanted my lawyer to check up on some of my business affairs to make sure I knew exactly how much money I was leaving everyone."

"So that's it."

Langston suddenly leaped forward and snatched the black patch off Norton Hill's left eye. Two bright blue eyes stared at him. But as he stepped to one side, only the right eye followed the motion. "Then you were the killer, Hill!" Langston snapped. "I thought so."

"What in heaven's name are you talking about?" growled the secretary. "A killer? What killer, Langston?"

"You know," said Langston coldly. "Because you were the man in the mask who was in here. Before I short-circuited the lights I could see the fellow's eyes plainly and only one of them moved—because the other was glass, just as is your left eye. Besides you have recently been wearing your hat. It was a little tight for you and left a red mark on your forehead. The killer wore a hat."

"But why would Hill suddenly turn into a murderer?" demanded Thorn.

"Why, he did seem worried when I told him my attorney would investigate my busi-

ness affairs!" ejaculated Henry Grayson. "And Hill has been handling all the money. Perhaps he has been stealing from the estate!"

The startled look on the secretary's face told Jim Langston that Grayson had hit squarely upon Hill's reason for turning killer. Langston was pulling something from his pockets. He held it out.

"So Martin found you tying this cord on the stairs and you killed him to keep him from talking," he sternly accused Hill.

"Martin—dead?" demanded Grayson, and for a man with a bad heart he seemed strangely calm. "Poor devil! That must have been him I heard struggling in the closet."

"Then you knew he was in the closet?" asked Langston, looking at his uncle in surprise. "Is that so, Uncle Henry?"

"I knew something was there," said the old man. "I could see through the crack at the inner edge of the door when you had it open. But I thought you had better tell me what was wrong, Jim."

"You all know too much," snarled Hill, and suddenly his gun was in his hand. "I'm going to get all three of you!"

Clark Thorn moved quickly—between the murderer and the old man in the bed. Hill would have to kill Thorn before he could hit Grayson.

"I'm getting you first, Langston!" the secretary yelled aiming his revolver at the blond young man.

Langston's hand flashed up as he leaped to one side. Hill fired, but his bullet merely thudded into the wall. The pocket flashlight that Lanston threw hit Hill squarely in the right eye, completely blinding him for the moment.

"Get him, Clark!" shouted Langston, as he leaped at the killer.

Thorn jumped to his cousin's assistance and held the murderer's wrists behind him, while Langston tied Hill's wrists with the strong black cord that had failed of its murder mission.

"Good work, boys!" applauded Henry Grayson, watching with satisfaction. "Now one of you had better send for the police." The old man smiled. "You know I almost died from unnatural causes."

"I hope you live a long time yet, Uncle Henry," said Clark Thorn, and sounded as if he meant it. "You'd better take my room tonight, though. I don't think you'll be very comfortable here."

"And miss all the excitement when the police come?" demanded Grayson. "Don't be silly, my boy. That's probably half my trouble. I have been wasting away from leading too much of a sheltered life."

Jim Langston and Clark Thorn looked at each other and grinned. Their attitude was that of two men who had suddenly found they had been making a mistake, and actually liked each other.

Insurance Investigator Tom Colville tackles an investigation that calls for some real sleuthing—and some fast and furious scrapping—when a corpse, with a soldering iron in his dead hand, suddenly turns up in

MURDER MAKES A CLAIM

A Baffling Mystery Novelet

By LEE E. WELLS

ONE OF THE MANY GRIPPING HEADLINERS IN OUR NEXT ISSUE!

Then Willis' hand shot into view and Tommy grabbed it just as Guerney raised the gun

THE GENTLEMAN NEXT DOOR

By C. K. M. SCANLON

Tommy Ward speeds wildly from town in a desperate effort to save his wife from a homicidal maniac!

TOMMY WARD dropped the two suitcases, swept his bride of eight days into his arms and marched proudly across the threshold.

"That is how it's done in the movies," he said. "Awful strain on the poor husband though. Well, do you still like the place?"

Freeing herself from his arms, Joan Ward pivoted gaily several times, ran from the living room to the dining room and then into the kitchen. Everything was spotless. The interior decorator had seen to that. The furniture and curtains were crisp and new. The kitchen linoleum sparkled like a freshly swabbed deck. The electrical appliances, while somewhat old, were shining brightly. They'd come from Joan's mother.

"It's perfect, Tommy," she exulted. "A prettier house was never built. Let's go upstairs and put our things away. Then we'll just sit. In our brand new chairs. The blue one is mine."

"You can have it." Tommy grinned from ear to ear. "The brown one is mine. And I want no wise cracks if my head rests against the back and makes a spot. By and by we can have it re-covered."

Joan laughed. "In other words, Mr. Tommy Ward, you are the master here?"

They were happy, these two. Both were twenty-four years old and full of the sparkle of life. They were matched in height, precisely five feet six. Joan was fair, blue-eyed. Tommy was darker, clean cut, handsome.

The doorbell rang as they were selecting their clothes closets. They looked at each other, dropped the clothes and raced down the steps.

"Our first guest," Joan exclaimed.

"More likely it's the milkman or baker looking for a new customer," Tommy said.

He opened the door. A man of about fifty stood there smiling at him. The man was sturdily built. The hair at his temples and what was left on top of his head was gray streaked. He wore nose glasses and had very white teeth.

"Hello," he said. "May I introduce myself? I'm Abel Guerney. I live next door."

"Oh." Joan unconsciously primped a bit. "On that big estate."

Guerney smiled. "Well, it's not exactly an estate. An acre and a half is all. It just looks big."

Tommy shook hands. "Come in, Mr. Guerney. I'm sorry we haven't anything in the house to offer you. We just got back from our—ah—trip."

"Your honeymoon," Guerney was smiling now. "Don't be so confounded bashful. I'm not looking for a handout. Not yet. After we become better acquainted, I'll drop over for a nip. I've a pretty good cellar myself."

HE sat down and admired the room. Then his smile faded. "Frankly, I came here on a business matter," he said. "You see, I always wanted to buy this property but I waited too long. Would you sell? At a reasonable profit for yourselves, of course."

"No, sir," Tommy declared. "This is a unique spot. I suffer from hay fever and there isn't a drop of pollen for six miles. That's just what I've been looking for. Hay fever is no joke, Mr. Guerney. It kept me out of the army. Besides, Joan is crazy about this house."

"Oh, I see." Guerney took no pains to conceal his disappointment. "Well, at that I'm in luck. I was afraid someone with a big family of children would move in and I like my property scrupulously kept. You have no family, so I've really nothing to worry about, yet. In fact, I'm glad to have you as neighbors."

Tommy grinned. "Thanks, Mr. Guerney. Except for your place, the nearest house is half a mile away. But you'll find no fault with us. We may swing a little party now and then."

Guerney winked. "When you do, invite me over. I'm a lonely old man. Retired lawyer, you know. Well, I must be running along."

Guerney arose and Tommy jumped to his feet. The older man was frowning a bit.

"There is one more thing you should be warned about," he said. "I have a brother, Willis, who's coming here tomorrow. He's a psycho-neurotic case. Got it at the Philippines when the Japs moved in. He was badly wounded and shocked into great nervousness. The Japs gave him no care. They merely threw him into a camp and let him stay. He was returned to this country six months ago."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Joan said.

Guerney smiled. "Don't be. Willis is doing so well they are letting him out of the army hospital at Clayton so that he may live with me. The quiet, fresh air and good country food will build him up in no time."

"We'll help all we can," Joan said.

"I'm certain of that," Guerney said. "However, Willis may act just a bit peculiar at times. Overlook it, and never mention the war to him. Those are orders from the Army doctors."

"We'll behave," Tommy promised. He slipped an arm around Joan as they walked to the door. "Thanks for coming over, Mr. Guerney. Hope we'll see you again soon."

They escorted him to the door.

Guerney disappeared through a cut in the tall hedge.

"I don't like having a psycho-neurotic living near you," Tommy said slowly. "I'm away all day long."

"Nonsense," Joan began to laugh. "If the Army doctors let him out, he wouldn't harm anyone. They know what they're doing. Stop worrying, Tommy."

"Well, he'd better be harmless," Tommy said. "Otherwise, I'll ask the hospital staff to yank him back."

"Don't be silly," Joan teased. "Come on. Let's get dinner."

Later, just before dusk, they were doing the dishes. Above the sink was a window with an unobstructed view of the road and the entrance to the Guerney home. They both stopped work as a car pulled up. Guerney got out first, walked around the car and opened the door. He helped his passenger out. Tommy and Joan craned their necks.

The passenger wore a long Army overcoat. He had no hat and no baggage. He was unusually tall and had a hawk-like, haggard looking face.

Tommy whistled. "Boy, he sure must have been through a lot."

"I feel sorry for him, Tommy," Joan said. "And you were afraid of him. Why, he's just a sick man."

"Yeah, I guess so," Tommy agreed dubiously. "I wish it was a physical sickness and not a mental one. Well, come on, I've just about caught up with you."

BEFORE starting to work the next morning, Tommy studied the house next door doubtfully for several minutes. He still felt nervous about Willis. But perhaps the Army doctors knew what they were doing. Tommy shrugged, kissed Joan again, went down the steps of the front porch and out to the car. He got in and drove away at a fast clip

because he had a nine-mile stretch before him.

Joan spent half the morning dusting. She hummed as she worked, stopping occasionally to admire some new object in the new house.

At eleven she finished the kitchen, collected the garbage and placed it in a paper bag. Then she walked down the little path to the refuse can near the garage. Halfway to it she slowed her pace. She felt as if someone were watching her. She turned around, but nobody was in sight.

With an effort she resumed her journey. Then, exasperatingly enough, the top of the new refuse can was stuck fast. She tugged at the lid in vain, then quit disgusted. It would have to wait until Tommy got home.

"Having some trouble?"

The voice of a man came directly from behind Joan. She whirled around in alarm and stepped back a pace or two, nearly upsetting the refuse can. The man looked like a living skeleton. Never had she seen anyone so incredibly thin. Abraham Lincoln would have appeared robust beside him. It appeared odd his voice should be so deep and heavy.

"Oh," Joan said. "Oh, you must be Willis."

"Yes, that's me." Joan didn't like his lopsided grin. "I just got in last night. Abel was telling me you were real nice people. I like to do favors for nice people. Maybe I can get that lid off that can for you, eh?"

Willis stepped by her, grasped the cover handle and tugged. It didn't budge. He muttered something, tried again, then lifted the can into both his long arms. He encircled it and squeezed. Joan gulped as she saw that stout metal can slowly crushed under the pressure exerted upon it. There was a sharp snap and the lid flew off.

Willis laughed delightedly, put the can down and bowed with a flourish.

"You got to get mad at them," he explained. "I get mad at anything stubborn. Just call me if you want any hard work done. Just call me."

Joan found her voice, which came out as a thin squeak.

"Thank—thank you, Willis. I won't forget. Now I've got to run. There are some potatoes on the stove and they may boil over."

She turned and fled, still holding the sack of garbage which she'd forgotten to deposit in the can. At the porch she remembered it. Resolutely she walked back. Willis was still there, with that lopsided grin. He raised the lid and bowed. After she threw the sack into the can and replaced the lid, she gave him a wavery smile and walked back to the kitchen. She was nearly running by the time she reached the steps.

After locking the door, she leaned against it weakly. Willis might be harmless, but Joan was mortally afraid of him. She didn't like his hideous strength, that crazy grin, or anything about him. But it wouldn't do to tell Tommy. He'd do something about it. Something which might make lots of trouble.

Joan kept the doors locked for the rest of the day. When Tommy pounded on the front door, she was careful to peek out of the window first, before letting him in. He swept her into his arms.

"Gosh, what a long day," he said happily. "Joan, why was the door locked?"

"No reason. I always keep the doors locked when I'm alone in the house. I suppose it's silly. But my mother used to do it and I acquired the habit."

Tommy pursed his lips. "Not a bad idea. Have you seen that fellow next door? Did he scare you?"

"I saw him. But good heavens, Tommy, he didn't scare me. He's a perfect gentleman. The refuse can lid was stuck and he removed it. He bowed very politely. He's sick all right, but a few hearty meals would fix him up. I'll mention that to Mr. Guerney."

"Always helping somebody else," Tommy said. "That's like my mom. Well, do I peel the potatoes tonight? Let's go. I'm hungry."

THE evening was uneventful until they locked up for the night. Tommy walked through the darkened living room to pull a window shade even with the others. Joan heard him gasp and throw the window wide open. She hurried to his side.

"Guess I need a psychiatrist," he told her. "I'll swear somebody was out there, looking into our house. Joan, tell me the truth. What about that bird next door?"

"Tommy, he's harmless. Just like I said."

Tommy frowned darkly. "Is he? I saw the refuse can tonight. He sure got the lid off the hard way. Did he actually squeeze that can all out of shape?"

"Y-yes. Yes, he did. It was the only sensible thing to do, Tommy."

"Okay," Tommy said. "If bending steel containers into useless junk strikes you as normal, it's okay with me."

Joan never hated anything so much as she did seeing her husband drive away the next morning. To tell the truth, Willis had her worried nearly to distraction. In her own heart, she knew Willis had been watching them through the window the night before. She locked the door and tried to forget her worries in hard work.

Later she ate lunch and cleaned the dishes. As she was leaving the kitchen, she heard a knock at the door. Looking through the curtain, she saw Willis standing on the back porch. Joan felt like screaming and held back the impulse with considerable effort. Willis mustn't know how greatly she feared him. It was, of course, terribly foolish. Perhaps if she let him in and talked to him,

she'd overcome her terror. With trembling fingers she unlocked the door.

He ducked his head to enter. Again that foolish grin appeared.

"Howdy, ma'am," he mumbled.

"Good afternoon, Willis," she said, trying to sound cordial. "I just finished lunch. Would you like me to give you a sandwich and a cup of tea?"

"Why, I'd be obliged." Willis sat down at the table. "You're real nice folks, like Abel told me. Just married, too. No wonder your husband kisses you every time he gets close."

Joan turned on him. "How did you know?" she demanded.

Willis grinned. "Last night I was peeking in from beside the hedge. It was real cute. Now don't get red in the face. I didn't mean nothing."

Joan forced a laugh and concealed her growing uneasiness.

"Of course not. Now, I've got some nice ham Tommy brought in from town. I'll give you a thick slice."

She opened a drawer, took out a long, slender-bladed kitchen knife, placed it on the table, and went to get the cold ham out of the ice box. When she returned Willis was holding the knife and gently passing his finger across the sharpened edge.

"Like a razor, ain't it?" He grinned broadly. Nothing lopsided about that smirk this time. "I like knives. Sharp knives."

He raised the blade and brought the point of the knife down hard, against the kitchen table. It stood there, shivering and making a soft noise. Joan put the platter of meat down and jerked the knife free.

"Mr. Guerney," she said angrily. "That's a brand new table and you've made a bad hole in it. You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

He looked up at her. His smile faded. Joan was reminded of a St. Bernard puppy who knew he was going to be whipped.

"I didn't mean anything," he whimpered. "Honest I didn't. I'll tell Abel to buy you a new table. A better one. I'm awful sorry. I—I just like knives. I'll make up for it. How about me mowing the lawn for a month? Would that square it?"

Joan forgave him quickly. She found herself torn between utter fear of this man and extreme sympathy. Again she thought that Army doctors would never let a man out of the hospital if he wasn't perfectly safe.

"Never mind," she said. "You don't have to mow the lawn. We can fill in that little scratch very easily. Now let me make you the sandwich."

WILLIS ate with the gusto of a half starved man. He bolted two cups of steaming tea. When he put the cup down finally, his gaze fell on the sleeve of his coat. It had a small rip.

"Look at that," he said. "I tore my coat. What'll I do? I can't go around with a torn coat."

"I'll sew it for you."

Joan was glad of the opportunity to do anything which would take her eyes off this horrible creature. She found her sewing basket. Willis removed the coat. She noticed that he was scrupulously neat. It seemed to be one of his quirks. She sewed the coat well.

Willis was overjoyed and thanked her earnestly. He put the coat on, buttoned it carefully. Then his eyes fell upon the needle which Joan had used. He picked it up. His long fingers handled it like a surgeon handles a suture needle. He rolled it gently, looked at Joan and grinned again.

"This is sharp too, but in a different way. I like things sharp on the point, but along the edges too. Anyway, at least one edge. Needle's ain't much good. Unless they're awful long. Here. Take it!"

She reached for the needle and Willis deliberately stuck it into the back of her hand. She gave a scream, more of terror than pain. A tiny spot of blood welled up.

"Did I hurt you?" Willis was at the opposite end of the spectrum of his emotions now. "Gosh, I didn't mean to do that. It slipped. Maybe I should tie your hand up?"

"No, I'll take care of it." Joan fought back her wild fright, her impulse to scream again. "It's nothing. Go away, now. Quick. Mr. Guerney might wonder what happened to you."

"Yes. That's right. He told me never to come here. I better get back before he finds out."

Willis started through the door, stopped and looked down at a jagged bit of protruding metal.

"That's where I tore my coat," he complained with a whine. "I could have torn it bad."

Then he was gone and Joan closed and locked the door. She was frantic by the time Tommy returned and she couldn't hide it.

"You were right, Tommy," she sobbed. "I am afraid of that man. He came in today. He stabbed the kitchen table with our new knife. He acted just as if he was stabbing someone. Then he stuck me with a needle. He says he likes sharp things. Tommy, I don't know what to do."

"Well, I know," Tommy declared. "I'm going to phone the hospital at Clayton and find out about him. Maybe they only thought he was harmless. He could have fooled them. One thing, you can't stay here alone while he's next door. That man, Guerney, had a nerve! Bringing a man like that here. I ought to punch his nose. Maybe I will, too."

Tommy found the number of the Government hospital some thirty miles north and talked to a doctor for several minutes. He

described Willis. Finally he hung up slowly.

"There's something wrong, Joan," he said. The hospital told me they never had anybody there named Willis Guerney. I even described him. The doctor couldn't recognize him from the description but admitted he might have had such a patient. Lots of the boys are released to their relatives. He said that if he really was a released patient, we didn't have to worry about him."

"But he's so odd," Joan protested feebly. "I can't help being afraid."

Tommy looked off into space. "I wonder if Guerney is pulling a stunt. Somehow I don't trust him."

"But, Tommy, down at the village they told us Guerney is a retired lawyer," Joan reminded him. "Remember. He's rich. Everyone says he's an awfully nice man." She shivered. "If only—only Willis hadn't come along!"

Tommy stroked his chin. "I've got an idea. Our camera is upstairs. Suppose we get a picture of Willis. I'll take it to the hospital. Then we'll know for sure."

"It might work," Joan admitted. "But Willis may not like having his picture taken."

"He won't even know." Tommy walked over to a window and looked out. "He's there now, sitting on that concrete bench by the big oak. Here's what we'll do. You go out, casually. I'll stay in this room, crouched near the window. You draw him into focus and I'll take his picture. Then I'll come out."

JOAN nodded and they put their plan into effect. Willis needed no second invitation to come over. He stood towering above Joan and grinning down at her. Tommy took two good shots of Willis through the open window. But as he lowered the camera, he noticed Guerney had appeared and was waiting by the corner of the house. Tommy gulped. The camera had made a clicking sound. Perhaps Guerney had heard it.

A few minutes later, when Tommy called through the door to Joan, Willis was gone and she was talking to Guerney. Tommy nodded to Guerney and Joan came inside again. Both she and Tommy drew a breath of relief.

They even slept well that night, comforted by the knowledge that they had accomplished something to counter the terror. But next morning Joan refused pointblank to leave when Tommy went to work.

"What would I do in town all day long alone?" she asked. "Who'd get your dinner tonight? If Willis comes, I won't let him in. I'll pretend I'm not at home."

"Okay," Tommy said grimly. "If Willis bothers you, get on the phone and call the constable. While he couldn't handle a man like Willis, he could shoot Willis if he gets violent. Remember—the telephone. I'll call you every hour if I can."

It was mid-afternoon when Tommy telephoned for the sixth time. He gave Joan some news.

"Listen carefully, darling. I had some trouble getting them to print a picture in a hurry, but I got it at last. I took it to the hospital at Clayton. The doctors don't know Willis. He's never been a patient there. I'm coming home as soon as I can. Stay near the phone. If Willis tries to force his way in, pull down the curtain next to the front door. That will be a signal to me that Willis is there. I'll be home after I make another call."

Joan hung up and looked fearfully in the direction of the Guerney estate. Quickly, she locked every window and door. She felt better after that and remained close to the telephone as Tommy had asked. She was positive now that Willis was a menace and that Guerney wasn't the kind, good man he was supposed to be. Otherwise why had he brought a maniac brother here. Joan mentally compared the two men. They were totally unalike. There wasn't the remotest resemblance between them.

In a little while Tommy called again. This time he was highly agitated.

"Joan, after nobody at the Army hospital recognized Willis, I went to the State Asylum," he cried. "I'm there now. They recognized Willis at once as a former burglar. Now he's an escaped homicidal maniac. He isn't Guerney's brother. Guerney used to be his lawyer and he has some scheme or other he's trying to put over. Willis escaped with inside help."

"Tommy, how long before you'll get home?" Joan asked breathlessly.

"I ought to make it in a little under half an hour. I tried to phone the village constable, but he's out somewhere. They'll tell him as soon as he gets in. The State Police barracks are too far away. See you in twenty minutes. And, darling, don't be afraid. I can handle Willis. Guerney, too, if necessary."

Joan hung up slowly, arose and turned around. She opened her mouth to shriek, but no sound came forth. Willis was standing behind her. That lopsided grin was going again. She swung to grab for the telephone, but he knocked her aside, seized the instrument and ripped it loose from the phone box on the wall. He flung the instrument to the floor.

"H—how did you get in?" Joan managed to ask. "Willis, what's wrong?"

"I picked the back door," Willis said happily. "It was easy. I can open all kinds of locks. Ain't nothing wrong. Just Mr. Guerney told me I should come over here and kill you."

"Kill—me?" Joan gave a gasp. "Why, Wil-

lis? Why do you want to kill me?"

"I don't know, except Mr. Guerney said you want to send me back to the asylum. And I like to kill people. I like to see people afraid of me and hear them holler for mercy. Of course, I'll make it easy for you, on account of you're being a friend of mine."

DESPERATELY Joan fought down her paralyzing fear. She smiled so casually that it surprised her.

"I'm not afraid of you, Willis," she said. "You aren't really a man who kills people. Mr. Guerney said you should, but you musn't mind him. Think for yourself. We're friends."

She forced herself to turn around and calmly pull down the window shade as a signal to Tommy. She must placate this maniac somehow. If she showed the slightest trace of fear, he'd kill her like a helpless chicken. She must play for time. All she needed was time.

Willis looked at the drawn curtain, transferred his gaze to the other windows and then raised the curtain to its normal halfway level.

"I like shades all kept the same," he explained. "I like things neat all the time. I'm sorry I got to kill. If I don't Mr. Guerney won't help me. I don't want to go back to the asylum. He told me to kill you."

He reached into his pocket and took out the new knife with which he had gouged a neat nick in the kitchen table.

"It's nice and sharp," he said. "I'm glad you didn't hide this knife because I wanted to use it ever since I handled it yesterday. I'm goin' to cut off your head."

Joan had but one thought now. Delay—delay—delay. Those were the words flashing through her mind. Keep cool. Keep him busy. Play for time. Time means everything. Her gaze went to his coat.

"Willis, you weren't careful when you entered the back door," she quavered. "You tore your sleeve again. A very bad tear. Your coat doesn't look at all neat. Shall I sew it for you?"

Willis stared at his sleeve. "Yes, it's ripped, ain't it? Bad, too. That's right. I guess you'd better sew it for me first."

Joan felt that she had gained a temporary lease on life.

"Come on, then," she said.

She hurried into the kitchen with Willis lumbering directly behind her. She had to keep her eyes off the knife he still carried. She musn't upset him in the slightest because he was ready to kill her. It mean't nothing more to him than sticking the knife into the kitchen table. Joan now sensed that nothing she could do or say would counteract the orders Guerney had given him. Willis was completely under Guerney's influence.

She got out her sewing basket and selected a needle with studied deliberation, trying not to look at Willis. Her hands were shaking so much she had difficulty in threading the needle. But the delay helped. A full four or five minutes was required to get the thread through the eye of the needle. Willis removed his coat and laid it on her lap, but he never let go of the knife. She didn't dare try to escape. He'd kill her instantly. Knowing this, she made every movement slow.

Outside she heard car brakes squeal. She knew the sound. Tommy had arrived. He was here and she was safe. She tried to hold Willis' attention even if Tommy blundered in. He seemed to be fascinated with the flashing needle.

Five minutes more went by and Tommy didn't appear. There were no footsteps on the porch. There was no indication that he was anywhere about. She wondered if her mind was growing as twisted as Willis'. She had heard the brakes. Where was Tommy?

She looked up at Willis and smiled a little. "I'll go over the whole coat, Willis. There are some other spots. They must be taken care of. Otherwise you certainly won't look neat."

"Fix 'em," Willis ordered. "Only hurry up. Mr. Guerney says I was to kill you and come right back because he was going to have your husband waiting over there. I got to kill your husband too."

Joan bit her lip then until she tasted the salt of her own blood. She kept plying the needle and praying. . . .

Outside, Tommy stopped the car in front of the house. Guerney was waiting in the driveway. He walked out to the car.

"I need your help, my boy," Guerney said. "Explanations can wait. Willis has gone berserk. He's turned out to be a dangerous maniac. I've got him locked in the cellar of my home, but I'm afraid he may break loose. I can't handle him alone."

"I'll help," Tommy said grimly. He glanced toward his own house. The shades drawn evenly. Tommy breathed a sigh of relief. "And after he is turned over to the authorities, I want an explanation of why you brought him here in the first place. Willis is a menace to any community."

"I realize that now," Guerney said as they walked through the hole in the hedge and mounted the porch of Guerney's home. "Step in. I'll tell you the whole story of why I brought him here. You'll see that I was right, too."

TOMMY walked into the big living room and sat down in a chair which Guerney indicated. The older man went to a table and opened the drawer. An instant later, Tommy was staring into the muzzle of a small bore revolver.

"Don't move, Ward!" Guerney said. "I

(Continued on page 94)

Gertie pulled Carmen out of the chair by her ears

MURDER IN THE WORST DEGREE

By JOE ARCHIBALD

It wasn't love that made Satchelfoot Kelly pin a rose on Willie Klump's lapel—but he sure did his rival a favor!

WILLIAM J. KLUMP, president of The Hawkeye Detective Agency, sat at his desk in his abbreviated office and busied himself with some plain and fancy doodling. Crime that required the services of a private gumshoe was not exactly rampant and had not been for several weeks and Willie was as far down in the mouth as was Jonah that time in relation to the whale.

Willie was not the detective the scenario writers dote on portraying. His feet were large enough, but not flat, and one side of his mouth was not pulled out of shape by talking out of it exclusively or stuffing it continually with fat stogies. Willie's face was such as to spur criminal characters to lift bigger things.

There was a sound at the door and Willie was about to rush for the closet and hide in same, having been threatened by bill collectors for three days, when he noticed that two letters had been slid under his door.

"It is maybe clients at last," Willie ex-

claimed and snatched at the mail eagerly. He made himself comfortable and tore open the first epistle. It said:

ARE YOU A DOODLER?

Have You Run Out of Ideas? 50 New Curlycues and Designs for $1.00. Send For Them Immediately. Our Supply is Limited.

Willie sighed and opened his other letter. It was another circular asking him if he wanted to be a detective. Humiliated, disgusted and indignant, Willie balled the sheet of paper up and threw it in the waste basket. The telephone rang and he snatched it.

"Hello, hello. Just a minute, as I have three clients on the tel—huh, stop kiddin' as it is you, Gert?"

"Maybe you was expectin' a call from Grable? Look, it is about time you took me out to dinner, Willie Klump, as I am not goin' to sit and twiddle my thumbs waitin' for the likes of you, not when I could have the pick of a dozen guys if I was so inclined. Shut up! You will meet me in front of Svensen's Hungarian Restaurant at seven sharp, you know that?"

"Awright," Willie sighed. "But look, business has been awful so you'd better bring some scratch as if you don't want dishpan hands—what do I do with my money? It is not Morgenthau who meets me out in front here every time I get a fee, is it?"

"He quit awhile ago, Willie. You should know that. Oh, incineratin' I put the slug on you, huh? I'm a chis'ler, am I? A gold-digger. Well, let me tell you—"

"Look, gimme a chancet, Gertie. I only said—"

"We'll talk that over when we eat, Willie Klump!" Gertrude Mudgett said and banged up the receiver and nearly broke Willie's eardrum.

"For two bucks I would stand that dame up,'" Willie snapped, "if it didn't mean it would cost me five to get my right arm set. Oh, well, there is nothin' I can do but be there."

Willie met Gertie on time and escorted her into the restaurant and Gertie grabbed one of Willie's hands and took a swift and critical gander at it.

"William Klump, that paw is a disgrace. When did you last git a manicure?"

"Me? I ain't no sissy," Willie said, amazed.

"You got a nerve appearin' with me in public with such mitts," Gertie said loud enough for the kitchen crew to hear. "You must of been minin' for coal somewheres with your bare hands. You could open a can of salmon with each of them thumbnails."

"I hate salmon," Willie sniffed. "Anyway, you know I never liked fancy trimmin's."

"Oh, no?" Gertie rejoindered. "I have heard they never could make no silk purse out of a souse's ear, but I will do it if it kills me."

"I think it is worth tryin', then," Willie said and quickly wished he hadn't. Gertie Mudgett dropped a forkful of mashed and peas back into her plate. "I did not like that crack, William Klump! So you would as soon I would kick off, hah?

"Let me tell you somethin', you fugitive from a psycopatrick ward. As far as I am concerned, you can—er—what you shakin' a finger at me for?" Gertie howled at the waiter standing near the cashier's desk. "I'll come over there and bite it offen you an' hand it to you on a plate!"

"Here we go ag'in," Willie said. "Look, if I promise to go to a barber shop tomorrer an' git my nails filed, will you leave us finish our chow, Gert?"

"Okay, Willie," Gertie said. "You never saw me when I wouldn't listen t' reason. It is a deal."

GERTRUDE MUDGETT even paid the check and Willie was sure an era of good feeling was sweeping over the world. So the next forenoon Willie hied himself to a barber shop and sat down in the chair at the little table behind which was one of the cutest cupcakes he had ever see.

Her coiffure was as black as Goering's future and her eyes made little gremlins do folk dances inside Willie's stomach. Willie planked both hands down on the table and the manicurist picked one up.

"Didn't you want a blacksmith shop, Bub?" she asked. "Not that I know of one in New York. Since they built subways an' had autos—"

"I did not come here to git insulted," Willie sniffed. "I will take my business elsewhere —" He got up to go but the gorgeous one still held to one of his big lunchhooks. "Oh, I was only kiddin', big boy. Park the physique and let me start paring the pinky first."

Willie grinned. His pulse went crazy and a barber paused at his task and asked a customer who was beating the bass drum somewhere nearby. Fifteen minutes later, William Klump left the tonsorial parlors with sore fingers and a date the next night with Carmen Viranda.

He was in a sort of trance when he crossed Madison Avenue near Forty-ninth and so did

not entirely miss contact with a very fast moving sedan. He was picked up fifteen feet away, along with a headlight.

"Better get him to the hospital," a strange voice said and then a much more familiar one yelped, "Don't waste your time, Mike. Who is it but Willie Klump! An' he lit on his head. Leave him be here as he will walk away in a minute."

"Oh, an' become a hit and run driver, huh, Satchelfoot?" Willie yipped. "I wouldn't put nothin' past you. You pick me up an'—"

"There is a corpse waitin' uptown," Kelly roared. "If I dropped into the ocean from an airplane I would git swallowed by a shark and find you inside it. Put him in and let's keep goin', Mike. This flathead can get in on murders the d—est ways. This time he nearly gets half-killed to do it."

"Wha-a-a-a-t?" Willie yelled. "Boy, is this my lucky day?" and he got up and brushed headlight glass off his blue serge, put a knee back in its socket, and asked what everybody was waiting for.

"You ain't human," Kelly said.

"Who got killed?" Willie asked when the police car got under way again.

"You might as well tell him, Satchelfoot," Mike said. "It is a character uptown, Willie. Brandish Sneff is the name. But you keep out of our way, see? Or else—"

"If anybody tells Willie off, it'll be me, Mike!" Satchelfoot snapped. "I have had lots of practise. Yeah, Willie, if you as much as feel how cold the stiff is, I will finish up what this jalopy failed to do."

"I know my place," Willie said in a huff. "Will it hurt you if I watch?"

In due time, the cops were looking at the remains of a citizen who lived in a little house sandwiched between two big apartment pueblos on East Ninety-Sixth. He had just about passed his fortieth year and he wore spectacles with glass as thick as the piece of headlight Willie Klump kept trying to pry loose from his ear.

Brandish Sneff wore his hair long and all indications pointed to the fact that he had eked out a living of a sort by inventing things. There were all sorts of crazy looking gadgets on his work bench and old letters from patent offices were stuffed into a pigeonhole of his old desk.

"Here is a diagram of a—it is writ down, Satchelfoot. It is a cigarette lighter that makes its own fuel. Hah, only an elephant could carry it in a pocket. The guy was balmy, Satchel—"

"I said not to touch nothin', you clamhead!" Kelly yelped. "Oh, where is that stiff appraiser? We can't do no work until that M.E. says how long he was dead and why. I don't see why they need him anyways as—"

A little man carrying a black bag came into the room. His eyebrows twitched and he sneered at Satchelfoot Kelly.

"Look, you poor man's Sherlock Holmes, I have been here a half hour and have already took an inventory of the corpse. I have been out makin' a cup of coffee. This character has been defunct about eleven hours. He was shot in two places by—"

"Somebody should go and check at the other place, Kelly," Willie grinned. "Maybe that is where the clue was left."

"Just keep that up, Willie!" Kelly ripped out. "What I will do to you, people will fergit Nazi murder camps."

"You won't do nothin', Satchelfoot. I have witnesses you hit me with a car. Let's try and see who done this and see our lawyers after."

SATCHELFOOT KELLY groaned deeply and then went to work on the case the best he knew how, which was none too good if you asked William Klump. However, the assassin must have been a very careless one as she left a very dainty handkerchief at the scene of the crime, even if it did not bear any initials.

"A dame!" Kelly yelped. "Now why would a dame come to see, much less rub out a gee like Brandish Sneff?"

"He was an inventor," Willie offered. "It could be he was workin' on a girdle that would stretch even without elastics and dames would commit murder to get the first one. Or else—"

Satchelfoot Kelly sat down and mopped his brow with the clue. Willie apprised him of the fact that exhibit A was no longer of much use the way he had destroyed whatever perfume or print that might have been on the dainty square of nose cloth.

"You are worse than usual today, Satchelfoot."

"I've stood enough!" Kelly howled. "I am goin' to pick this cluck up and heave him out in the street, Mike. Give me room here—"

"A friend of mine knows a big lawyer," Willie hinted. "I could sue for a grand as how do I know I did not git internal injuries as one time I knew a guy who walked around three months with a ruptured spleen."

"Let's git busy on the joint," Satchelfoot

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said, after a long groan. He and his boys rummaged through Sneff's roll-top desk and Kelly finally hopped onto a bill that had recently been sent to the inventor.

"For a cossage!" Kelly yelped. "Cost six cabbage leaves and he sent it on the twenty-eighth of the month whicht is only yesterday. We have got the name of the flowerist and they will know the doll who got it and I guess that is pretty good deduction for me, Willie Klump."

"It is about time you hit on a crime you couldn't help but solve," Willie sniffed. "It is just my luck you picked me up on the way to a crime like this one."

"And here is a small white rose, a little faded, right here by this chair," Satchelfoot yelped. "She wore that cossage I bet when she eased her heartbeat off. Dames are cold-blooded awright. They can keep cossages in the icebox fer a week."

Willie began brushing his newly manicured nails on his sleeve and Satchelfoot jumped at him and grabbed both of Willie's hands.

"Why, dearie, you have a manicure!" he mimicked. "It is like puttin' a gold dome on a glue factory. If you could only cook an' sew—here, Willie, lemme pin a rose on you. We don't need it, we got so much evidence!"

"Awright, go ahead and have your fun," Willie snorted as Satchelfoot pinned the rose to Willie's lapel. "Is it a crime I should want some refinery? I am just trying to rise above the likes of you."

"Only when you git in an elevator that I just miss, Willie," Kelly laughed. "Now I will call the flowerist." He got the posie expert on the public utility gadget and Willie plunked down in a chair and wondered why he couldn't trip over such a simple case of homicide.

"Hello," Kelly said. "Mr. Emsbok? I am Detective Kelly from headquarters and I am callin' to see who it was Brandish Sneff sent a cossage to. Cossage-cossage—can't you understand English? A what? A core-sarge. Okay, have it your way. Who? You'll look it up, okay. . . . Yeah? It was delivered to a Miss Hermone Oglamack, Apartment C Four, Bilk Apartments? Oh, boys, she's cooked. G'bye Mr. Emsbok."

"Well, so long, Satchelfoot," Willie muttered. "I must go and buck that cigaret line on Lexington. I imagine the tail of it is in Passaic, N. J., about now. This smokes situation is gittin' awful an' I wish Gert would let me go back to chawing tobacco."

[*Turn to Page 82*]

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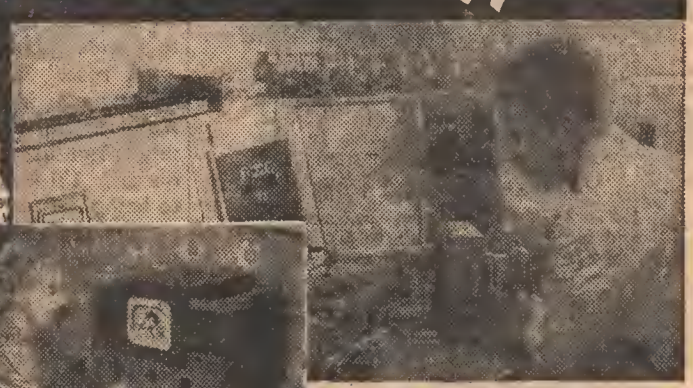

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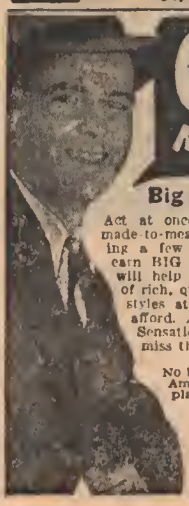

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"Sorry you couldn't steal this one from me, Willie," Kelly said. "Read the papers t'night."

"I never miss Dick Tracy," Willie said. He made his way over to his office and found no mail and took some cold toast from a desk drawer and spread peanut butter over it. While he ate, he wondered if he shouldn't take down some notes to see why the rubout of Sneff was so easy. No murderer should be quite so dumb, he mused, to cause him to wonder about it.

"A rose," Willie wrote down. "By any other name is—no, I mean it was silly of Kelly to hand over even evidence that he might not have to use. Well, he pinned it on me. I'll save the petals when it is close to being defunct and put them in a bowl.

"She leaves a hanky too. She deserves to git caught quick and I guess Hermone Oglamack is quite an amateur at murder. That means it was done in the heat of an argument and not planned so she beat the braising room up the river. Why am I botherin' with it anyways as Satchelfoot is already making an arrest.

"That is what puzzles me though. Satchelfoot making an arrest. It is like a foul ball goin' in the stands somehow. I guess I have not much faith in the big baboon. Maybe I should keep on the beam just in case."

Willie Klump had no sooner closed up his memo pad when a petal dropped off his rose and fluttered to the desk.

"Huh, it is wiltin' already so I better pick it apart and put it in the sponge dish here. I wisht it had kept until my date with Gertie tomorrow night—er—what am I sayin'? Why, I made one with that cuticle cutter, that Carmen Viranda.

"Why, I wouldn't dare—but I'm goin' to. Oh, boys, she has more curves than the whole Yank pitchin' staff—I got to think up a swell alibi for Gertie or by this time next week they'll be diggin' some dirt back in the family plot on the farm. What's got into me?"

Willie began peeling the rose apart. It was still damp and when he got close to the core of the posy, he began to wonder at certain particles that were stuck to the petals.

"That is darned funny," Willie said and examined them closer. "It is not pollen as roses don't have it that comes off and it is brownish yeller. Huh!"

He took a toothpick from his pocket and fished out one of the little particles. He tasted it. He bit it with his teeth.

"Cigaret tobacco," Willie said. "The doll got some in the rose somehow. Oh, I thought I had somethin' but it got in the damp petals when she banged a cig down on the back of her hand before she touched it off. It is a swell smellin' rose and it is a pity one so fair —but was she? I will wait to see her pitcher. Carmen Viranda, m-m-m! I will wear my new yeller and purple tie."

A MAN came in.

"You William J. Klump?" he asked.

"I am," Willie said.

'Have you thought of more life insurance, pal? You never know how close you might come to gettin' killed tomorrer. So—"

"How did you know about me an' Gertie Mudgett? You git out of here this instant!"

"Huh? Oh, awright. You look like a bad risk anyway, Buster." And the insurance salesman gave Willie a very uncomplimentary leave taking.

"The guy must be psychick," Willie bit out.

Now the very next evening, Willie shined his brown shoes, took his extra pair of blue serge pants from under the mattress on his bed and trimmed some cuffs of a Parrish blue shirt.

Two hours later he was sitting in a small bistro on East Forty-Eighth with Carmen Viranda, as slick a dish as was ever cooked up by Ma Pulchritude. Willie wondered if she had painted her wine-colored frock on and she had an upsweep hair-do and a shade of lipstick that turned his knees to cornstarch pudding.

"You are ravenous tonight," Willie gulped.

"You're not just kiddin', Sugar. I could eat a steak the size of a barrel-head and I will."

"A steak? Why—there ain't no steak to be had—is there?" Willie asked.

"Sure. They ain't on the menu. They got 'em here if you know 'em. Five fifty —with onions."

"Couldn't we have 'em without the five-fifty? I mean—I only got—one yesterday an'—" Willie perspired freely. His assets came to just two bucks, sixty. He wondered how he was going to beat this rap. "I got to make a phone call home," Willie said.

"You fergit somethin', Sugar?"

"I fergot to stay there. Well, I'll be back in a jiff. I—"

Carmen Viranda hooked an arm through Willie's and hung on until a waiter took an order for two steaks. Willie knew his ruse had failed. He said a prayer under his breath.

[*Turn page*]

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"Oh, git me out of here somehow, somebody. It is a busy place an' the dishes must be stacked ten foot high in the sink. Oh, Lord, if Willie needs succor now—he sung in the choir for four years—Amen."

"You look a little sick, Sugar," Carmen said and pulled at his ear. "Ain't you havin' fun?"

"I could scream laughin'," Willie forced out.

"Go right ahead," said a voice that Willie had heard many times before. He winced, swung his head around. Gertie Mudgett stood eyeing him, arms akimbo, jaw thrust out, and primed for combat.

"Who is the character?" Carmen Viranda wanted to know, and then Gertie pulled Carmen out of her chair by the ears, lifted her off the floor and then bounced her on her veranda. Carmen arose and swung on Gertie and Gertie ducked and threw a hook of her own that landed on the digit decorator's chops and Carmen's eyeballs would have clicked together like pool balls if it had not been that the bridge of her nose separated them.

Willie Klump watched all this from under the table. The waiters converged on the battling females and finally ejected them. Willie crawled across the floor to the kitchen and made his hurried exit in that manner.

"Well, my prayer was answered," he gulped. "The hard way."

Willie was in court the next day watching Gertie pay some lettuce for disturbing the peace and he also read a paper where it said Hermone Oglamack was cleared of a murder charge, she having proved where she was every hour of the night of the rubout.

There was a picture of Hermone in the journal and she was a ringer for Bacall and Willie knew she was innocent right then and there, as why should a cute wren like her want to have a date with a very insignificant homely citizen like the late Brandish Sneff anyway.

"That means the murder case is open still," Willie told himself. "It is a free-for all. I think I will mooch down to where that Sneff lived and see if I can git in an' look around."

THE president of The Hawkeye Detective Agency met Gertrude Mudgett outside a few minutes later.

"Don't you hit me!" Willie yipped. "You already paid through the nose an' anyway

it was your fault you sicked me onto that designin' dame. You pushed me right at her.

"But I never was so glad to see anybody like when you arrived an' saved me from K.P. Steaks, she ordered, Gertie. Oh, I was in an awful spot an'—"

"It is only because I can't afford another assault with intents to kill, Willie Klump," Gertie snapped, "that saves you, you two-timin' bum! Well that lunchhook trimmer won't be in no shape to steal no other guys for awhile. The next one I catch you with I will ruin for life."

"You are sure devoted to me," Willie said. "If you don't mind, I have some business to look into, Gert. I guess you saw where Satchelfoot Kelly missed the bus again. If he ever has a conviction it will only be the courage of his."

"I don't see you solving no cases, Willie Klump," Gertie retorted. "How do you expect to support me I want to know."

"Why, I never expected, I mean—that is—we are still young. We—" Willie backed away. "Let's talk things over sometime, huh?" He got to a kiosk and ducked out of sight.

"I wisht she wouldn't rush me like that. Only two years we been goin' together. You look at a dame an' they think it is a promise. Well, where was I goin' now? Oh, yeah, Brandish Sneff's."

WHEN Willie got to where Sneff once lived, he found the door open and he walked in and made his way to the ex-inventor's workshop. Here he found a little male number with pink eyes and a cowlick looking over Sneff's belongings. Willie nodded pleasantly.

[*Turn page*]

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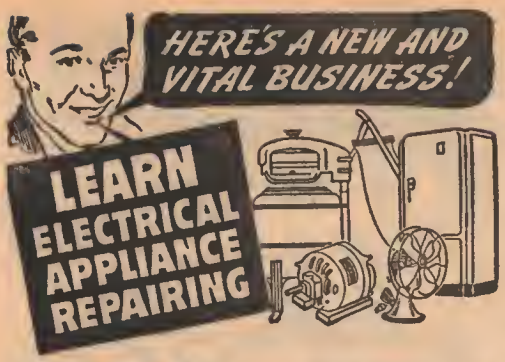

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"Are you the feller executing his estate?" he asked.

"I am Leander Sneff, poor Brandish's brother. And who might you be?"

"I am William Klump, Detective. Here is my card."

"Really? Well, I hope somebody can find out who did this awful thing," Leander said. "This is quite a strange looking contraption I have here, isn't it, Klunk?"

"The name is—skip it. What is that?" Willie asked.

"He had a label on it. It says Manicurself," Leander replied. "Wonder what it means? Here's another invention that could of made him rich, Krump. A door key and flashlight all in one. Oh, he was smart as they came, wa'n't he?"

"But not smart enough to stay," Willie quipped. "A manicurself. It says just what it means. You don't have to go to a barber shop to git a manicure and look at the dough a dame could save. Well, you find any clues saying a murderer might have been here and who it could of been?"

"I ain't a detective, Kump. What beats me, though, is what they said about Brandish havin' a tate-a-tate with a member of the opposite sex. Why he was scairt of women. Brandish would pull his hat down over his eyes when he passed a show window of a store displayin' lingery."

"It beats me," Willie said. "Unlest he reformed. I am tryin' to think of somethin' I can't very well. I should go over to my office and put down some notes. I feel for you durin' your bereavement, Mr. Sneff."

"Don't mention it," the little citizen said, and busied himsel with another gadget he found thrown into an old box. Willie looked about for several minutes but found nothing in the way of a lead.

He left the place and meandered to his office and there he sat down and tried to reconstruct a crime although he had no idea how it had been built in the first place. The telephone set up a fuss and Willie answered it. It was Gertie.

"Hello, Willie. You know what? That Carmen was reg'lar. She called me an' said you never told her you had pledged a trough with me or elst she would have kept her hooks off. She wants that we should join her an' some friends in a party Sat'day night an' make it a sixsome."

"Is that good?" Willie wanted to know. "The first thing I know, Hitler will be forgiven an' git invited to dinner in Drowning Street. Awright, but somethin' tells me it will end up in a night court some place."

"You be sure an' behave, Willie Klump!"

"Me? Who starts it every time, huh? I er—let's drop it as we'll—okay, I'll meet you at six-thirty, Gert. A client just come in so I have to hang up." Willie turned and saw a woebegone Satchelfoot Kelly take over the other chair.

"Don't look at me like that, Willie," Kelly said. "You got to admit if you was in my place, you would have figured it just as easy."

"Tryin' to make me admit I am as dumb as you, huh?" Willie sniffed. "I won't. I bet the slayer was not a doll but left clues only a doll would leave so's the cops would chase dames everywhere instead of males—what am I sayin'? That could be true!"

"You got somethin' there, maybe," Satchelfoot admitted. "But there ain't a clue, nor no motive. The little victim had no more enemies than Little Eva in Uncle Tom's Cabin. I wisht I had just a little start. Willie, you hidin' anythin' from the cops like always even though you never know you are unless I tell you?"

"Stop braggin'" Willie said. "You only got your dome to keep your ears from sticking together. An' I am a very busy man as I keep office hours. So long, Buster."

"The next thing I pin on you won't be a rose, flathead," Kelly snapped.

"By the way, Satchelfoot," Willie grinned. "Don't never give away souvenirs at the scene of a crime. There is no way of tellin' who it once belonged to. Not that it means anythin', but remember it was you give it away.

"You would catch a fish an' throw it back in and it would be caught the next day by somebody else who would cut it open and find a sparkler worth about sixty G's in its stomach. If you get what I mean. Satchelfoot, it is just you are glued to the eight-ball."

"I never knew I could hate you, Willie, more than I did yesterday," Satchelfoot yelped. "If somebody hated Sneff like I do you, then I am glad I am unable to git on his trail. The next mushrooms you eat I hope ain't them at all, just toadstools!" And Satchelfoot Kelly went out and slammed the door.

"He is more fun," Willie grinned. "Now what was it I said? Oh, what was it? About a guy plantin' the clues so's people would think—I must of forgot."

On Saturday night, William Klump met Gertrude Mudgett in front of the latter's rooming house and they took a cab to Car-

[*Turn page*]

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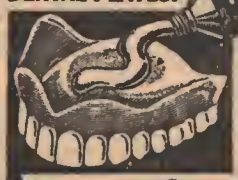

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men Viranda's apartment on West Fourteenth Street. Here a party was already in progress and the radio was on and Willie first looked at the handsome looking gee who was dancing with a red-headed dish.

But for a slight mouse under one eye, Carmen seemed in the pink and Willie was sure she had been imbibing more than just celery tonic, or she would not have been sitting on the mantel with a candlestick balanced on her hair-do.

"Park the bodies and name your liniment," Carmen said. "We even emptied our lighters in them skull-busters."

"Well, you ast for it," Willie said under his breath to Gertie.

"Listen, we will be somebody after this," Gertie replied. "So—"

"If we can remember we are," Willie countered. "Let's get interduced."

CARMEN'S date was an ordinary looking bar-fly. The redhead's was something else again. He had all the good looks a dozen other men had been robbed of. He was the athletic type and fairly reeked of savoir faire. His locks were curly and the color of an old pair of well polished cordovans. Carmen Viranda came down off the mantel and introduced the redhead to Willie and Gert.

"Carelesh of me, huh? Meet my ol' pal, Claire Bonnay, who makes more lettuce in the manicure business than anybody in the big town, Willie. She can afford to support that big han'shome bum of a husband without him workin', and who wouldn't if they could an' had a chance? At the same time, meet the great hunk of wasted man power. Byron, this is William Klump, a detective."

"A pleasure, Mr. Klump. I'm a dog, aren't I? But I love it. I never did like to work and isn't a person crazy who doesn't have to and does?"

"Ah—er—I would think a citizen would have some pride," Willie sniffed and shook hands with Byron's workhorse.

Gertrude Mudgett said, "You be careful what you say to my frien's or I'll—"

"Oh, forgit it, Gertie," Claire Bonnay said. "Byron has been insulted by experts and does not take offense at all, as he knows what a louse he is. As long as he can live without working that is all he cares. If I didn't love the no-good bum like I do, he'd be out on his ear tomorrer morning.

"Let's forget everythin' an' have fun, shall we? Come on, fill your glasses again. Anybody who ever claimed they was able to go

out on one of these binges even on their hands and knees was liars."

"I think we should go, Gertie," Willie said, shuddering as Carmen poured more panther perspiration in his glass. "If you knowed what just one is startin' to do t' me—"

"They won't never drink me under no table, Willie Klump. I'll show 'em! Come on, fill this up ag'in, or is a Scotchman tendin' bar?"

"Look, Gertie—"

"Shut up, Willie. Nobody is goin' to say I am no wet blanket."

"No good'll come of this," Willie groaned. "One swallow of this I got just snapped my head back. I—"

"Byron," the redhead yipped. "Roll me a cig too. Show these folks how we lick the shortage. We don't stand in them long cig lines, not us. Another reason I am willin' to support the han'some bum. He can make a cigaret as good as any machine. He'll roll us all one, won't you, darlin'? Or do you want me to bend a chair leg over your sculpture's dream of a noggin?"

"Why, I would be charmed, I'm sure," the parasite said. Willie slyly poured his cocktail into a plantpot and the begonia began to wilt in hardly any time at all. Then he sat back and watched Mrs. Byron Bonnay display her skill at fashioning a coffin-nail.

And for the first time, William Klump became aware of the fact that the human leech was wearing a white rose in his buttonhole. An association of ideas had a conference in the back of Willie's head. He began to take interest in the party.

"Watch him," the redhead said. "Hardly spills a smidge of tobacco. No cowboy could even tie this handsome jerk! Give that one to Gertie, Byron."

"He's a lucky stiff," Carmen's boy friend piped up. "What a wallop he'd get if the manicure business took a dive and it was fashionable to bite your own fingernails off, huh?"

"You bring up a point there," Willie said, wondering if someone else had spoken. He saw a few particles of the makings spray the white rose and he uttered a little choking cry and nearly passed out. The redhead rushed to the bathroom and brought Willie some ammonia.

"Imagine it," Gertie Mudgett said. "What a weaklin' I got. Two snorts and he is ready for the cleaners'. Oh, I'll train him. Willie, stop actin' silly. I am on my seventh and I can't feel a thing. I could walk a chalkline right now. I—"

[*Turn page*]

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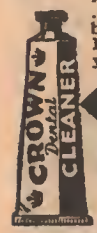

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Plunk!

"Gertie!" Willie cried out.

The redhead sighed.

"That is how they generally go out, Willie. But you have fun just the same."

Willie Klump glared at the survivors, dared them to mention Gertie's fadeout in a derogatory manner. Nobody made a crack.

"Roll Willie a cigaret, Byron," the redhead said. "Show him how you can."

"Amazin'," Willie enthused as he watched the legalized gigolo roll a casket spike. He thought of an invention that had never hit a market and a lot of little needles began tatting up and down his spine. He took the cig and let Byron light it and he could smell the scent of the parasite's posy. It reminded Willie there was a book he had yet to read—"A Tea Rose in Brooklyn."

"You know we should get home too, you pretty bum," the redhead said, after a third nightcap. "Somebody's liable to break in and lift the family jewelry. They have robbed a dozen apartments in the joint the last three weeks."

"Yeah," Byron said. "An' if I only catch any of the crooks in the act—I may not be a breadwinner but I got the stuff to protect the bread my baby brings home."

"Come on, this is getting to be a dead party," Carmen said. "Fill 'em up."

"Speakin' of dead parties," William Klump said, as unthinking and as blunt as always, "no doubt you read of one named Brandish Sneff. Somebody rubbed him out."

BYRON'S glass shook and splashed giggle water on Carmen's frock.

"The assassin was careless an' should of wore gloves," Willie said. "There was fingerprints at the scene of the deed. We git them matched up right—"

"What you lookin' at my husban' like that for, Willie?" the redhead screeched. "You'd think he done it! Ha—"

"Did you?" Willie asked the parlor type.

"Wha-a-a-a? Are you crazy, Klump?"

"I've been called that," Willie said. "All I know is Brandish Sneff invented a gadget that would of put bowcoop manicurists out of work if it had been made in big lots. Sneff called it The Manicurself and it was why he was liquidated, I'll bet my clean shirt. The criminal lost a rose out of his lapel. Coincidents, huh? That is no geranium you got, Junior!" he tossed at Byron.

"This is silly," the redhead gulped, shocked cold sober as she got a gander at Byron's touch of ague. "He couldn't hurt a flea."

"Sneff wasn't a flea," Willie pointed out. "Alls he has to do, your han'some spouse, is offer to give his prints to show he is innercent. If I ever saw murder in the worst degree—how about it, pal? We can make an ink-pad an'—then we can forget it was you who spilled tobacker flakes in a rose while rolling—"

"Stand back!" Byron Bonnay cracked. "They won't never take me! Everybody—"

"Why, he packs a Roscoe," Willie said. "Would those bullets that are now on the D.A.'s desk and whicht was took out of Sneff's cadaver match with the ones left in that rod? It is no use. The joint is surrounded an'—"

"You goin' to stand there an' let this flatfoot send Byron to the chair?" the redhead howled. "Fair weather frien's, hah? All the hooch you drank on us. Now is the time for all close pals to come to the aid of a party I married—we fix this goof's wagon an' nobody can—"

The redhead's friends rallied together and rushed Willie Klump. Byron Bonnay danced around and tried to get a shot at the president of the Hawkeye Agency and thought he saw a good chance. He fired and Carmen Viranda lost an earring.

Carmen's male date had Willie around the knees and was sinking his bicuspids in Willie's calf. The redhead had a babushka wrapped around Willie's neck and was really getting plenty of leverage on the Klump windpipe. The idle husband took another shot at Willie and just missed.

Willie knew the citizen couldn't keep missing and he tried to screech for cops. Everything got blacker and he knew he was due for the final curtain. Byron was leveling the Betsy right at his brisket when something flew across the room and knocked the redhead's mate flat on his face.

A very familiar war cry cut through the buzzing in Willie's ears. Pressure eased up on his gullet and his eyes cleared. Somebody grabbed at the redhead and tossed her right into the bathroom.

"It's okay, Willie!" Gertrude Mudgett roared. "I can handle this riff-raff! Just take a seat an' rest up as—"

Willie crawled to a divan and fell across it just as Carmen Viranda flew over it.

"No punch can keep me down for long," Gertie yelped, "whether it comes out of a bottle or a bunch of knuckles, Willie!"

"I should of known," Willie forced out. "I wouldn't bend Carmen's boy frien' anymore,

[*Turn page*]

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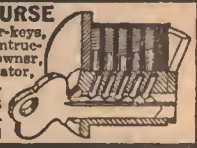

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Gert, as he might snap like a ginger-cookie. Anyway, Byron—look ou-u-u-u-ut!"

The redhead's torch was up on his hands and knees and trying to grab for the gun and Gertie Mudgett came down on the character's fingers with both heels and Byron screamed like a hyena with an ulcerated tooth and Gertrude Mudgett sat on him and beat him over his handsome skull with both dukes.

"Gather up the gun, Willie," she yelled. "I think we have occupied this atoll."

"Yeah," Willie muttered. "You'd think MacArthur or somebody would of sent the air corpse in first, though. Send a runner to the C.P. and ast for artillery support. These Japs ain't pushovers—what brought you t' Okinawa, Gertie? Why didn' you tell me you joined the Marines? I—"

"Oh, snap out of it, Willie," Gertie sniffed. "Git hold of yourself. We are in the U.S. and have caught the killer of Brandish Sneff. Remember?"

William Klump picked up his marbles, one by one. When he had his full set, he grinned at Gertie.

"I guess we make a good team, huh? Imagine it, Gert. That Satchelfoot Kelly pinnin' a rose on me! Call the cops, will you?"

It was sometime later that Byron Bonnay, realizing that even a Philadelphia mouthpiece with connections in Washington could not get a nod from a jury of twelve good men and true, let his hair down to the floor. He dictated the old business he was to get in due time up the Hudson.

"Yeah, if that guy had put that on the market, I would of had to go t' work. A friend of mine who was the patent attorney Sneff went to tipped me off the gee had a gold mine in that automatic fingernail trimmer and polisher. Anythin' but goin' to work is my motto.

"I sat up nights thinkin' what it would be to have to hop out of the sack at six A.M. It was a fate worse than death. My babe would've had to look fer a job, too. I planted the female clues to keep the cops off the scent.

"Oh, I should've ditched that artillery, but they are hard to get an' there was burglars in that apartment house an'—why wasn't I born willin' to work like anybody else? I'll plead insanity—"

"I've never heard a worst motive," Willie clipped. "You should be ashamed of yourself, you fiend. Roll me a cig, huh?"

"I'll talk to the reporters anytime," Gertie Mudgett said. "I bet Mrs. Thin Man will

give out with a slow burn. Let's git a radio program to write us up, Willie. Of courst we got to git married as while solving crimes we could easy git compermised."

"That can wait," Willie said quickly. "Why, if it ain't Satchelfoot Kelly!"

"Don't try to act friendly, you double-crosser! The D.A. is goin' to throw the book at you for interferin' in boner-fried police business! Stole evidence that—"

"You pinned it on me, Satchelfoot, an' I can prove it," Willie said. "An' a rose by any other name if given by you, smells. Read the guilty citizen's confession, Kelly, an' see what the motive was and how I tripped him up. The cigaret shortage helped. Show Satchelfoot how you can roll them better than the Lone Ranger, Byron."

Satchelfoot Kelly walked to a door, opened it and left the room, slamming the door behind him. "It must be dark in there, Gert," Willie grinned. "That is a closet."

"As I was sayin'," Gertie Mudgett said. "We should git married right away as like I said—"

"The place you get licenses is right across the street," a cop suggested, winking at a newspaperman.

"Nobody ast you," Willie yelped.

"He has got a right to talk," Gertie howled. "An' I'm askin' right now, William Klump! What are your intentions?"

Willie got up and started running when Satchelfoot Kelly came out of the closet holding a fire extinguisher. It could also snuff out a life and that seemed to be Kelly's intention. When Willie hid in a cellar six blocks away a half an hour later, he indulged in a wide grin.

"It is nice havin' a pal to come to bat for you just when you need him. Like Satchelfoot," he said.

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NEXT ISSUE

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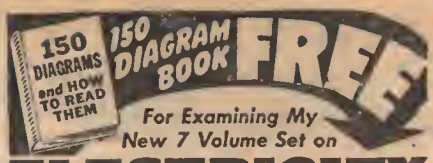

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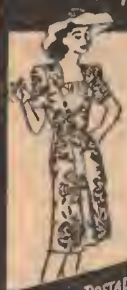

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THE GENTLEMAN NEXT DOOR

(Continued from Page 76)

really hate to do this, but you and your pretty wife brought it upon yourselves. I promised to tell you why and I intend to. It begins eight years ago. Willis was a professional burglar and a good one. He robbed the home of some very wealthy people and made off with a quarter of a million dollars' worth of gems. He concealed them just before he was captured. That's when I met Willis. He retained me. I used to be a criminal lawyer."

"You're no lawyer, Guerney," Tommy retorted. "You're just a plain criminal!"

Guerney shrugged. "It really doesn't matter. Willis told me he had hidden the loot, but he refused to tell where unless I got him out of prison first. Then he promised to share it with me. Soon afterward Willis went raving mad. He was sent to a mental institution. But bad investments had ruined me and I was desperate for the money those gems would bring. So I helped Willis escape from the asylum. I've been trying ever since to make him remember where he hid the loot. In time, I could have succeeded. But you and your wife interfered. I saw you take his picture last night and I guessed what the result would be. I'm sorry, Ward. Willis is now in your house. After he has killed your wife, he'll return and kill you."

Tommy looked straight at Guerney. "If Joan is dead, it wasn't Willis who killed her. It was you. If she's dead, I'll strangle you myself. Even Willis can't stop me. Guerney, that dinky gun of yours has too small a calibre. It couldn't stop a man unless you hit him in a vital spot. Those little bullets won't prevent me from reaching you. I'm coming after you, Guerney."

Guerney's hand, holding the little gun, began to tremble. Tommy arose slowly. He kept talking about how harmless the gun was, how a big gun can tear a man so he can't move, but a small bullet only hurts a bit.

Guerney was pressing the trigger when Joan screamed. The scream didn't come from inside the house next door. It sounded from the yard itself. Guerney was disconcerted by the cry. He fired—and missed. Tommy didn't miss. He slugged Guerney with all his might and knocked him flat. Guerney lay where he fell, stunned. Then Tommy bolted out of the house.

Joan was running toward him. Behind her lumbered Willis. The big maniac seemed to be in some kind of trouble. His arms were jammed into the sleeves of his coat, but he appeared to have lost his hands somewhere. But there was no mistake regarding his intentions. He had lost his grin and his good nature. His eyes flashed with fury. He had reverted into a maniac obsessed with a desire to kill.

Joan was heading toward Tommy. He called to her to keep on going. Then he braced himself to meet Willis. As the huge maniac came closer, Tommy saw the gleam of a knife protruding from one sleeve. Then Willis' hand shot into view, holding the blade. Tommy grabbed it.

There was a shot behind him. It was Guerney, trying to make certain that Tommy wouldn't get away. He saw Joan fleeing for her life and leveled the gun in her direction.

"Willis, Guerney is trying to kill you," Tommy yelled. "He shot at you. He's afraid of you."

Willis hesitated. The knife was held high, his face was contorted with fury. He looked beyond Tommy at Guerney. At that wild glare the attorney lost his nerve and started shooting. Two bullets hit Willis. They were mere nicks, yet they provided enough pain to change his purpose. Forgetting about Tommy, he charged straight at the lawyer. Guerney was shooting as fast as he could pull the trigger, but there were only four bullets left. Then Willis was upon him.

The knife flashed, raised again and this time it didn't flash. The gleam was replaced by a dark stain. Guerney screamed and tried to use the tiny pistol as a club. Tommy snatched up a shovel and rushed over. Two hard blows with the shovel caused Willis to slump down across the squirming body of his intended victim.

Tommy rolled Willis off, made certain that Guerney couldn't get away and then called Joan back, telling her to find some

[*Turn page*]

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rope quickly. In a short time Willis was securely tied. Soon he recovered consciousness and commenced to groan from the pain of the wounds. His violent fit had departed.

GUERNEY was badly cut, but Joan managed to stem the flow of blood. Tommy bent over Willis.

"Those gems you stole, Willis. Guerney wants them, but they must be returned to the owners. Where are they?"

Willis grinned toothily. "Ain't none. Never been any. I didn't get a chance to swipe 'em. Later the people just said I did so they could collect a lot of insurance. I fooled Guerney. I told him I'd give him half if he'd get me out of prison. That was the only way I could make him help me. You going to send me back?"

"You're going back and this time you'll stay there," Tommy said. "But if your brain is as clear as it seems to be right now, you can understand that Guerney won't be far away. He's going to prison, too."

"I hope he rots there," Willis said savagely. "I know I ain't right in the head. Sometimes I can think, but other times I can't. I wasn't so bad when I got here, but

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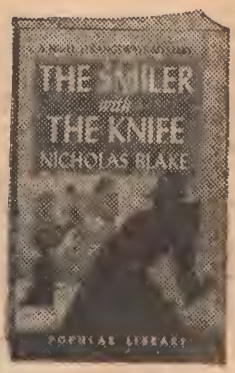

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Guerney kept driving me, trying to make me think where I'd hidden the stuff. I couldn't tell him there never was any. My mind cracked again. I'm never going to get better. The docs told me so. I—might as well be dead."

He closed his eyes wearily. Two cars of State Police rolled up then. Events moved fast, after that. When it was over, Tommy led Joan back to their little home.

"It was pretty awful, darling. I sat there with Guerney holding a gun on me and saying that Willis was killing you. It was strange. The minute he said that, the gun didn't scare me one bit. Now, how in the world did you get away from him? What happened in there? Willis looked as if he was in a strait-jacket when he came flying out."

Joan smiled. "In a way it was a strait-jacket. I sewed his coat sleeve together so there was no opening. I did the same to the other one. He sat there watching me, fingering the knife. He was going to kill me the moment I finished. I never sewed anything so slowly in my life. I held the coat for him. When he put both arms into the sleeves, I pulled the coat tight and buttoned it. He couldn't get out. But he still had the knife. He started to cut himself free. Then I ran. Tommy, I—"

"Everything is all right now," Tommy said. "Forget it. We can't let this get us. Joan, let's start dinner."

She linked an arm under his. "Let's, Tommy. I'm over my scare. I'm never afraid with you around."

MURDER THROUGH MAGIC

(Concluded from Page 66)

sort of thing and you may not be around next time to worry Alice and me."

Alice wrinkled her turned-up little nose in bewilderment.

"I still don't see why Polly hired you?" she said. "That doesn't make sense."

Mallory grinned. "She has one trait in common with you two. She didn't recognize my talent. When her stepfather insisted on having someone witness Reese's so-called demonstration, she picked me because she thought I played at magic like a parlor game. She thought she could get away with the racket and I wouldn't tumble. But she knows now that some amateurs are really good."

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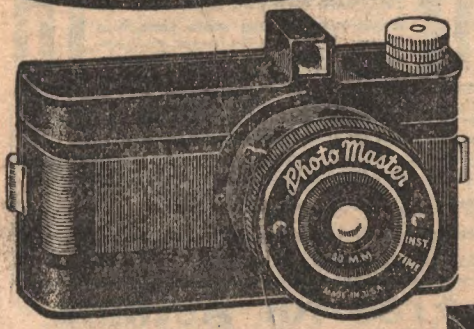

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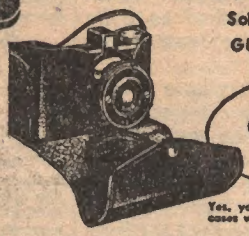

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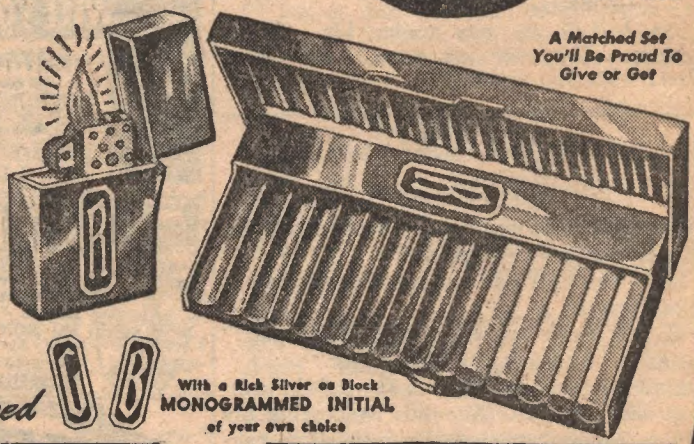

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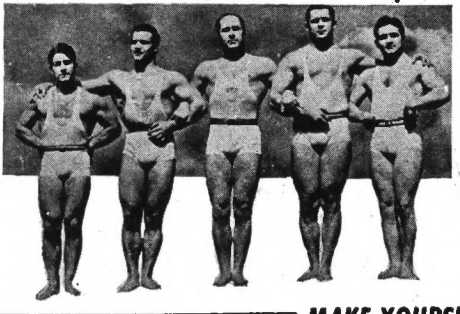

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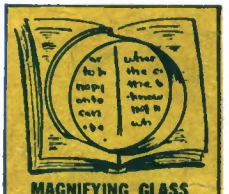

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